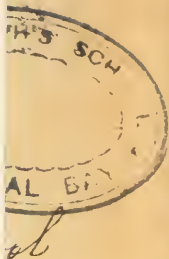


Gwen





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GWEN:
The "Little Mother" of "Merrilee."



Australian Edition.
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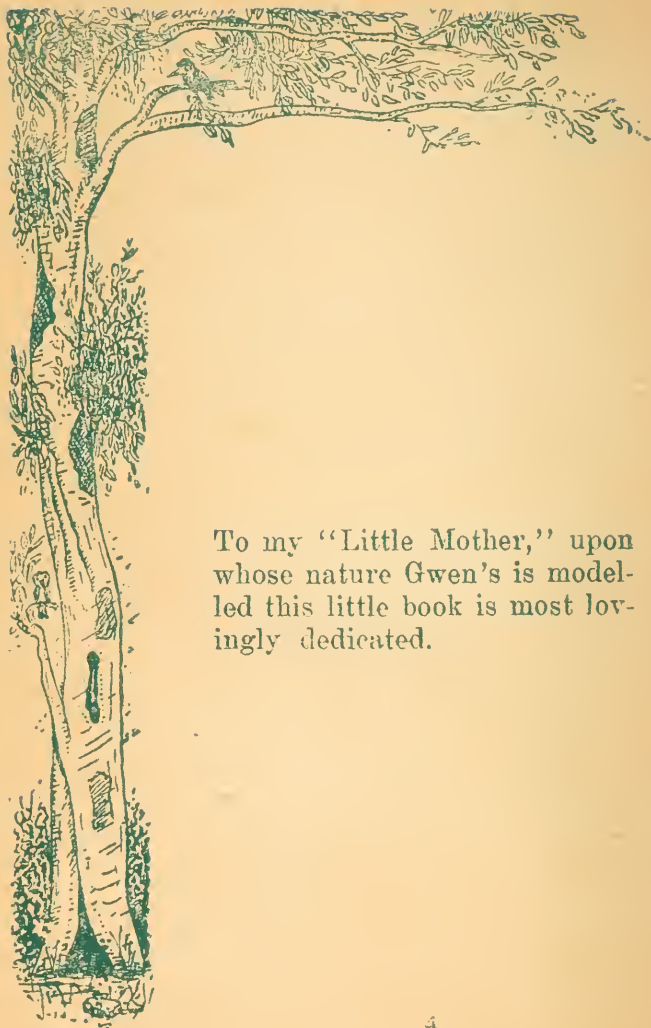
A Romance of —
— Australian Station Life. —



Leslie Alfred Redgrave

Sydney D. Smith, 200 Castlereagh Street, Sydney.

MCMXIII.

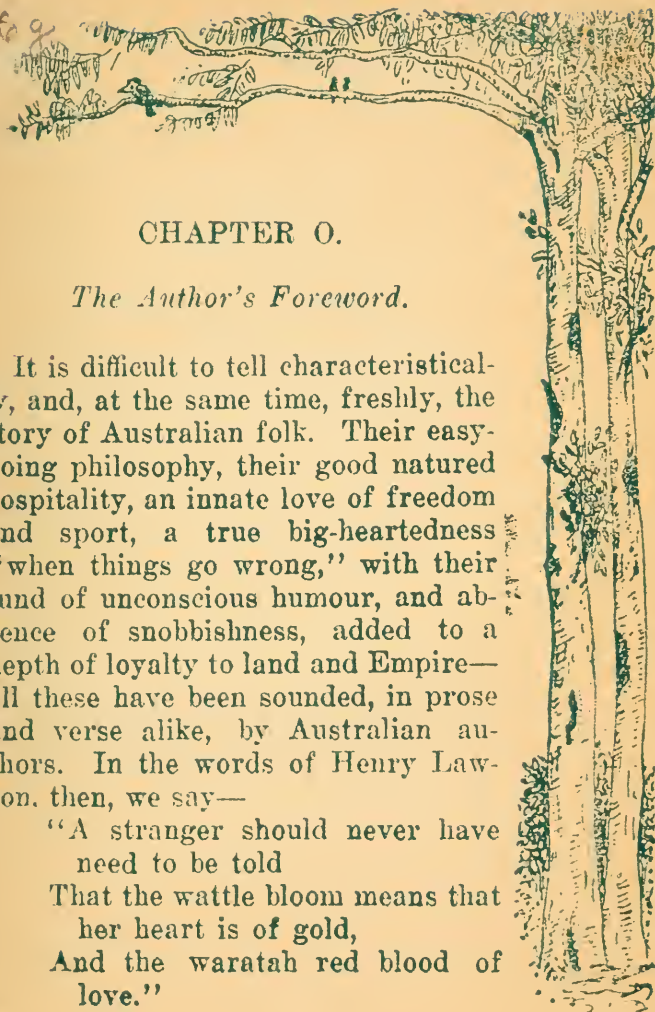


To my "Little Mother," upon
whose nature Gwen's is model-
led this little book is most lov-
ingly dedicated.

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CHAPTER O.

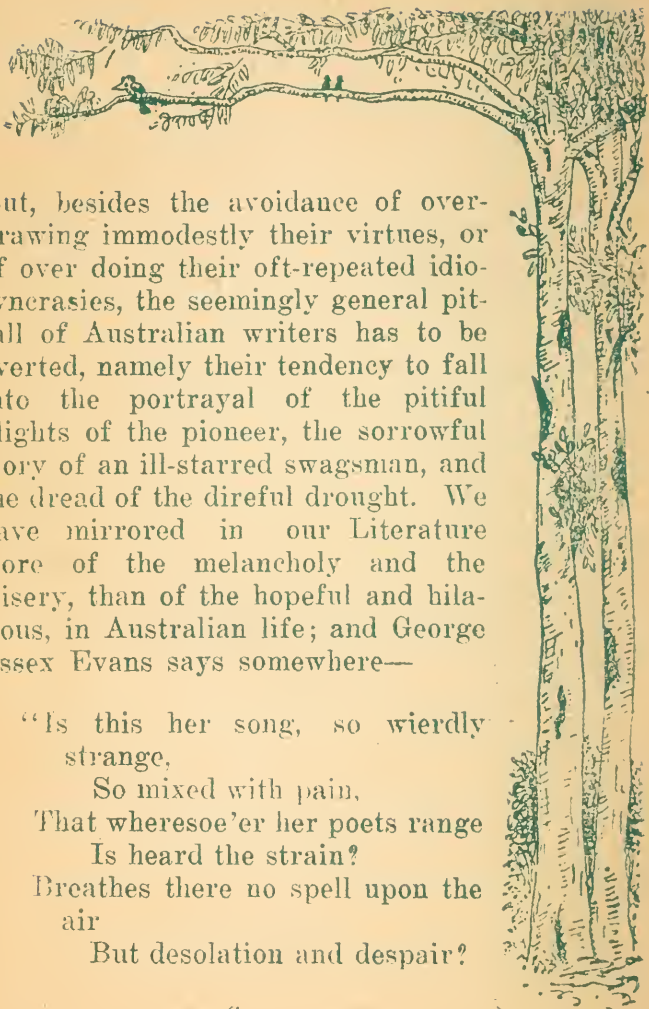
The Author's Foreword.

It is difficult to tell characteristically, and, at the same time, freshly, the story of Australian folk. Their easy-going philosophy, their good natured hospitality, an innate love of freedom and sport, a true big-heartedness "when things go wrong," with their fund of unconscious humour, and absence of snobbishness, added to a depth of loyalty to land and Empire—all these have been sounded, in prose and verse alike, by Australian authors. In the words of Henry Lawson, then, we say—

"A stranger should never have
need to be told

That the wattle bloom means that
her heart is of gold,

And the waratah red blood of
love."



But, besides the avoidance of over-drawing immodestly their virtues, or of over doing their oft-repeated idiosyncrasies, the seemingly general pitfall of Australian writers has to be averted, namely their tendency to fall into the portrayal of the pitiful plights of the pioneer, the sorrowful story of an ill-starred swagsman, and the dread of the direful drought. We have mirrored in our Literature more of the melancholy and the misery, than of the hopeful and hilarious, in Australian life; and George Essex Evans says somewhere—

“Is this her song, so wierdly
 strange,
 So mixed with pain,
That wheresoe’er her poets range
 Is heard the strain?
Breathes there no spell upon the
 air
 But desolation and despair?”



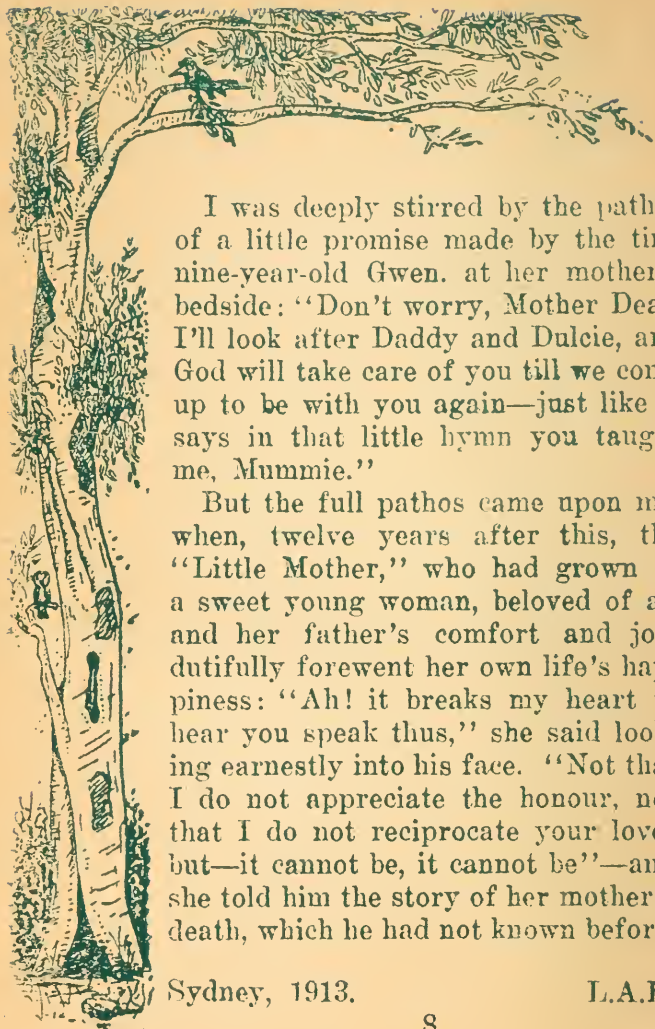
No voice, save Sorrow's to intrude

Upon her mountain solitude
And sun-kissed plain?"

Hence it is that this simple story of Station life may seem so romantic, for its bushland setting, as to scarcely savour of its Australian source, at least to those who have been guided by our literature as to our country and its people. I fancy I hear them remark, in the words of our poet, J. B. O'Hara—

"Here, too, are dreams that wing
Rich regions of Romance;
Love waking when the Spring
Begins its first wild dance."

But, having had the story from the lips of Gertrude Garland herself, one evening on the old verandah at "Merrilee," I am able to write at least authentically of the lovely life of selfless sacrifice of her girl chum, Gwendoline Langdon.

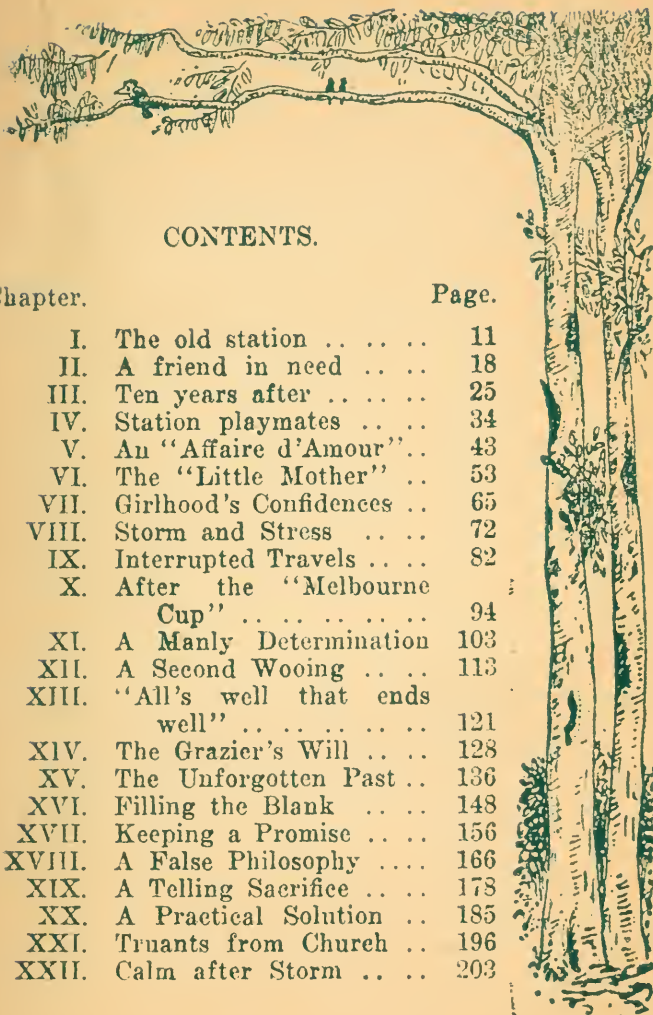


I was deeply stirred by the pathos of a little promise made by the tiny nine-year-old Gwen. at her mother's bedside: "Don't worry, Mother Dear, I'll look after Daddy and Dulcie, and God will take care of you till we come up to be with you again—just like it says in that little hymn you taught me, Mummie."

But the full pathos came upon me, when, twelve years after this, the "Little Mother," who had grown to a sweet young woman, beloved of all and her father's comfort and joy, dutifully forewent her own life's happiness: "Ah! it breaks my heart to hear you speak thus," she said looking earnestly into his face. "Not that I do not appreciate the honour, not that I do not reciprocate your love; but—it cannot be, it cannot be"—and she told him the story of her mother's death, which he had not known before.

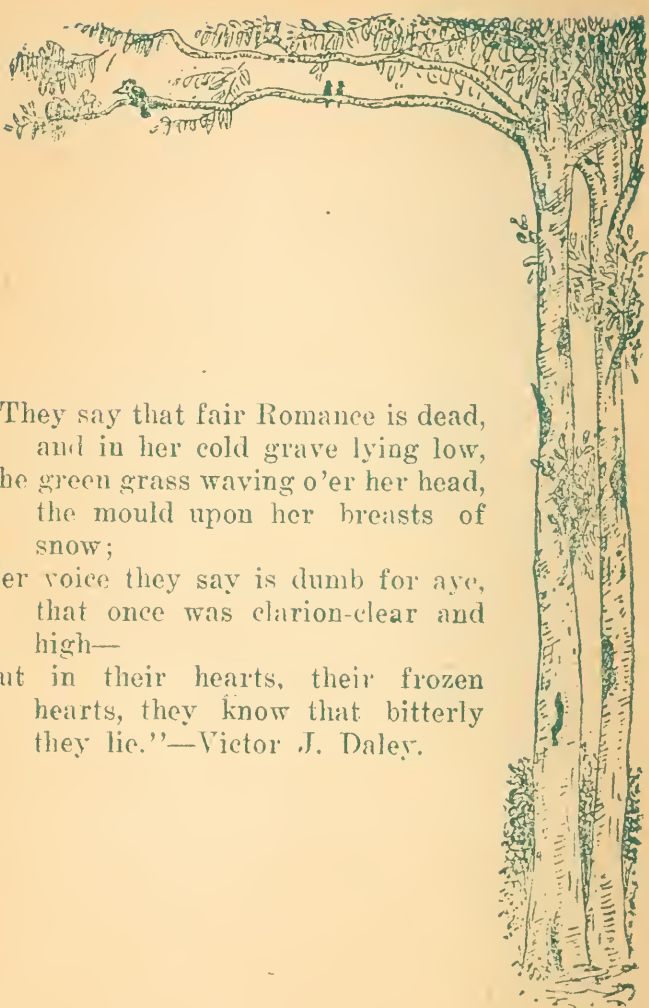
Sydney, 1913.

L.A.R.



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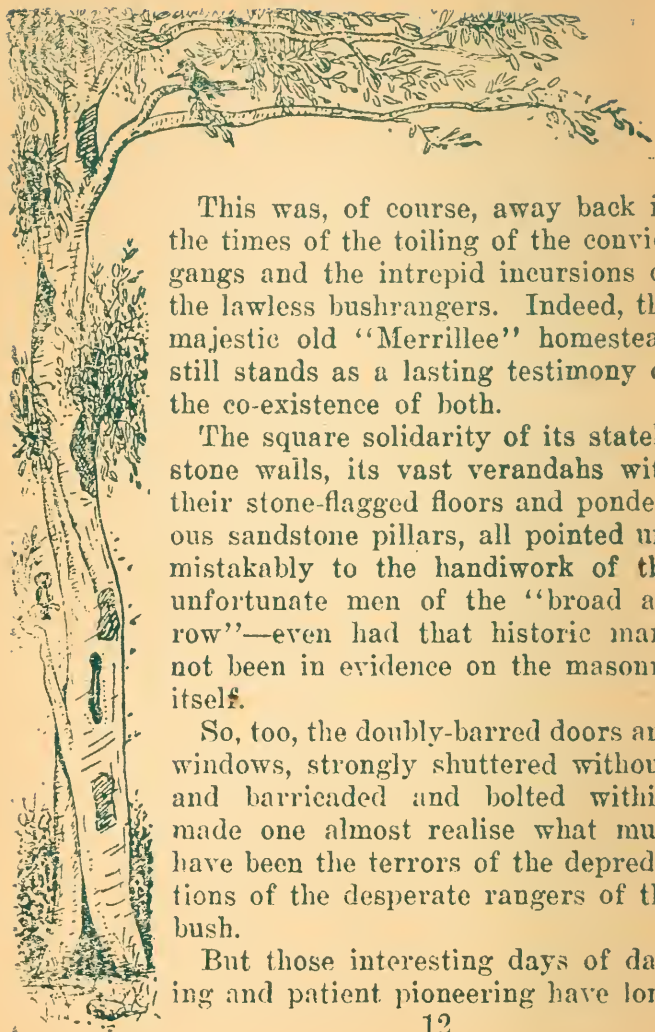
“They say that fair Romance is dead,
and in her cold grave lying low,
The green grass waving o’er her head,
the mould upon her breasts of
snow;
Her voice they say is dumb for aye,
that once was clarion-clear and
high—
But in their hearts, their frozen
hearts, they know that bitterly
they lie.”—Victor J. Daley.



CHAPTER I.

The Old Station.

“Merrillee” Station had been the property of the Garland family since the 'forties. Old John Alexander Garland had been sent out to Australia by the Home Government as a Captain in the New South Wales military forces during the strenuous years of early colonisation in the Mother State. Being placed in charge of a large body of penal workers, he had done much in opening up the country beyond the Great Dividing Range, and, in recognition of his able services in that capacity, had been made a Crown Grant of a hundred thousand acres of good grazing land.

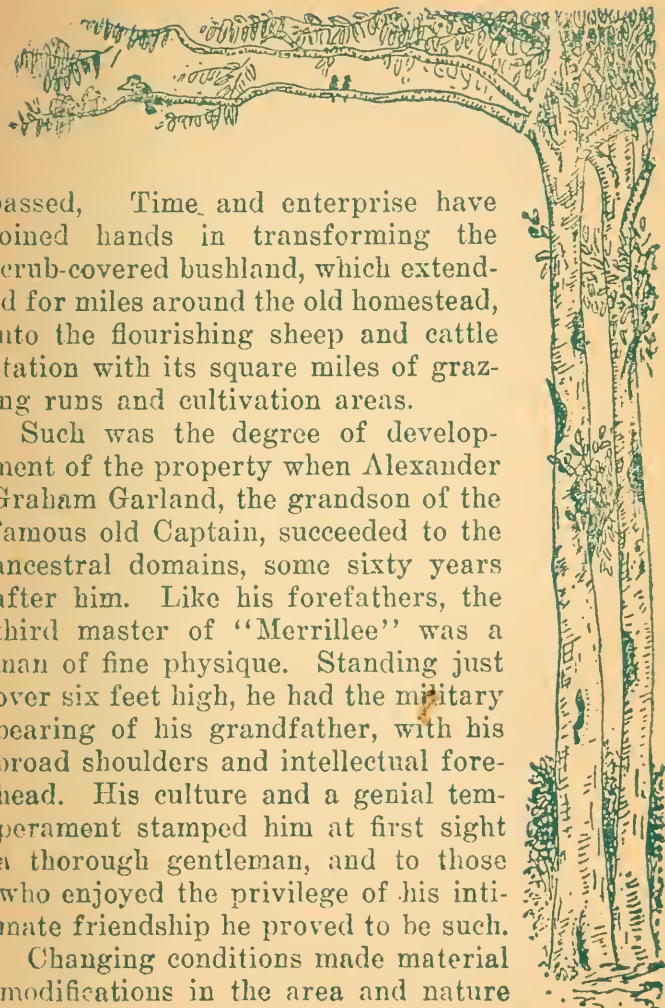


This was, of course, away back in the times of the toiling of the convict gangs and the intrepid incursions of the lawless bushrangers. Indeed, the majestic old "Merrillee" homestead still stands as a lasting testimony of the co-existence of both.

The square solidarity of its stately stone walls, its vast verandahs with their stone-flagged floors and ponderous sandstone pillars, all pointed unmistakably to the handiwork of the unfortunate men of the "broad arrow"—even had that historic mark not been in evidence on the masonry itself.

So, too, the doubly-barred doors and windows, strongly shuttered without, and barricaded and bolted within, made one almost realise what must have been the terrors of the depredations of the desperate rangers of the bush.

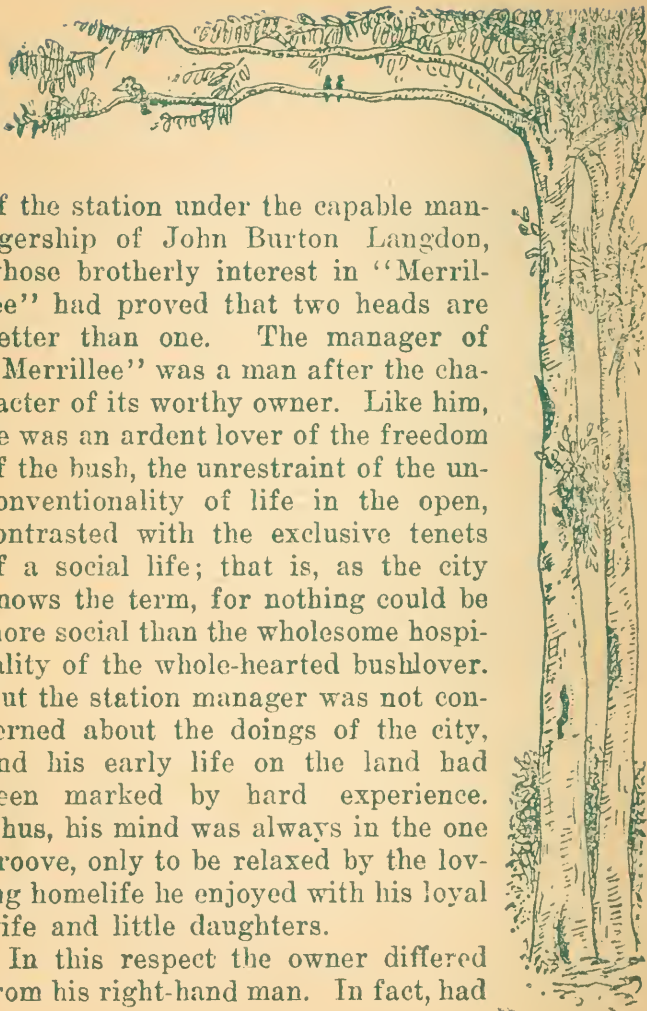
But those interesting days of daring and patient pioneering have long



passed, Time and enterprise have joined hands in transforming the scrub-covered bushland, which extended for miles around the old homestead, into the flourishing sheep and cattle station with its square miles of grazing runs and cultivation areas.

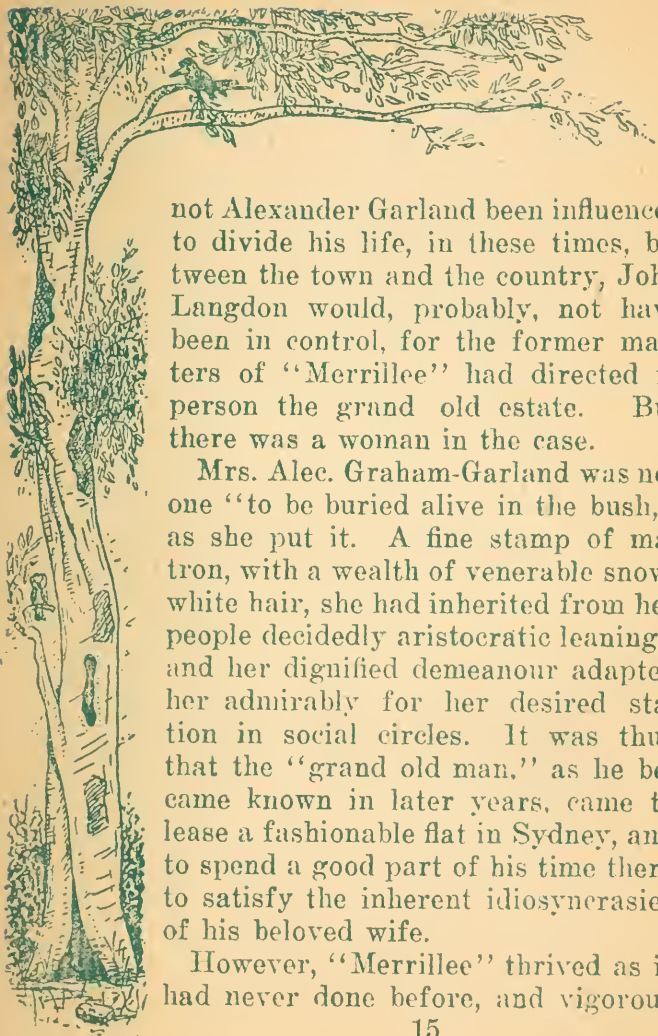
Such was the degree of development of the property when Alexander Graham Garland, the grandson of the famous old Captain, succeeded to the ancestral domains, some sixty years after him. Like his forefathers, the third master of "Merrilee" was a man of fine physique. Standing just over six feet high, he had the military bearing of his grandfather, with his broad shoulders and intellectual forehead. His culture and a genial temperament stamped him at first sight a thorough gentleman, and to those who enjoyed the privilege of his intimate friendship he proved to be such.

Changing conditions made material modifications in the area and nature



of the station under the capable management of John Burton Langdon, whose brotherly interest in "Merrillee" had proved that two heads are better than one. The manager of "Merrillee" was a man after the character of its worthy owner. Like him, he was an ardent lover of the freedom of the bush, the unrestraint of the unconventionality of life in the open, contrasted with the exclusive tenets of a social life; that is, as the city knows the term, for nothing could be more social than the wholesome hospitality of the whole-hearted bushlover. But the station manager was not concerned about the doings of the city, and his early life on the land had been marked by hard experience. Thus, his mind was always in the one groove, only to be relaxed by the loving homelife he enjoyed with his loyal wife and little daughters.

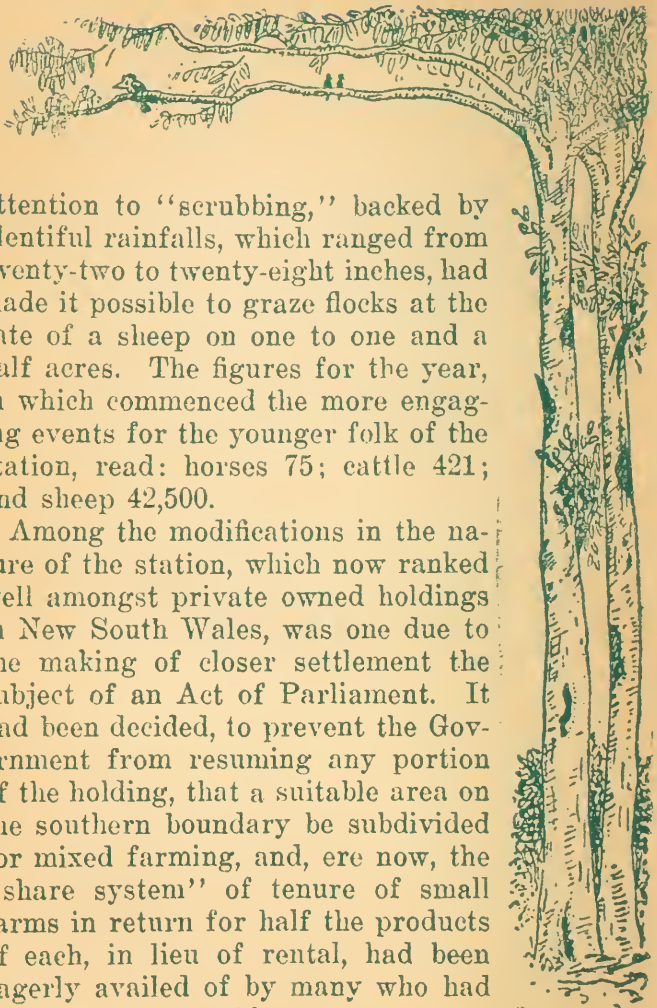
In this respect the owner differed from his right-hand man. In fact, had



not Alexander Garland been influenced to divide his life, in these times, between the town and the country, John Langdon would, probably, not have been in control, for the former masters of "Merrillee" had directed in person the grand old estate. But there was a woman in the case.

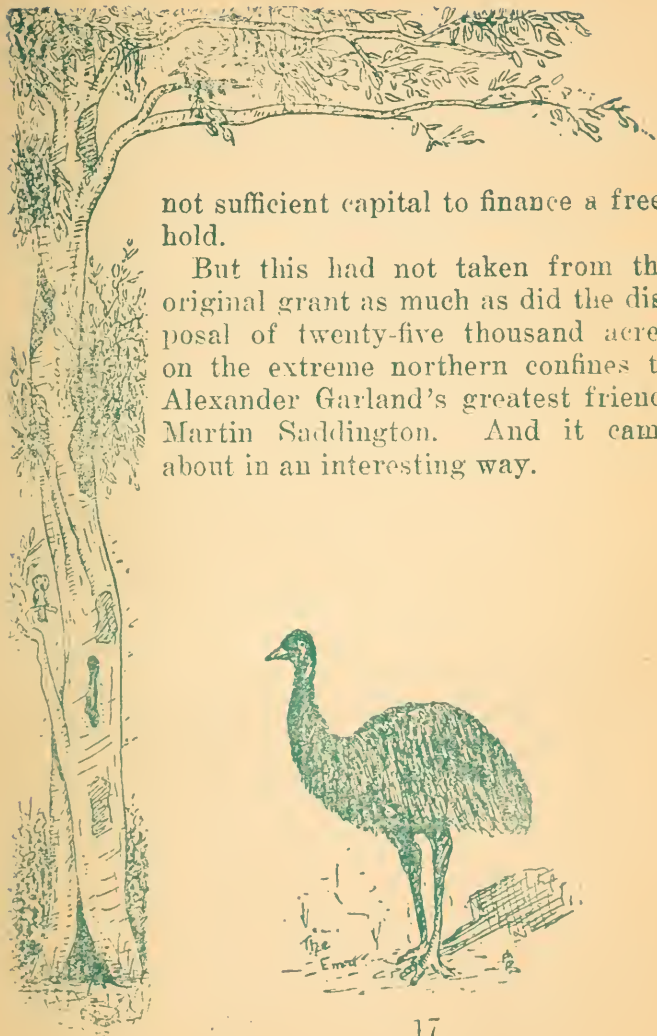
Mrs. Alec. Graham-Garland was not one "to be buried alive in the bush," as she put it. A fine stamp of matron, with a wealth of venerable snow-white hair, she had inherited from her people decidedly aristocratic leanings, and her dignified demeanour adapted her admirably for her desired station in social circles. It was thus that the "grand old man," as he became known in later years, came to lease a fashionable flat in Sydney, and to spend a good part of his time there to satisfy the inherent idiosyncrasies of his beloved wife.

However, "Merrillee" thrived as it had never done before, and vigorous



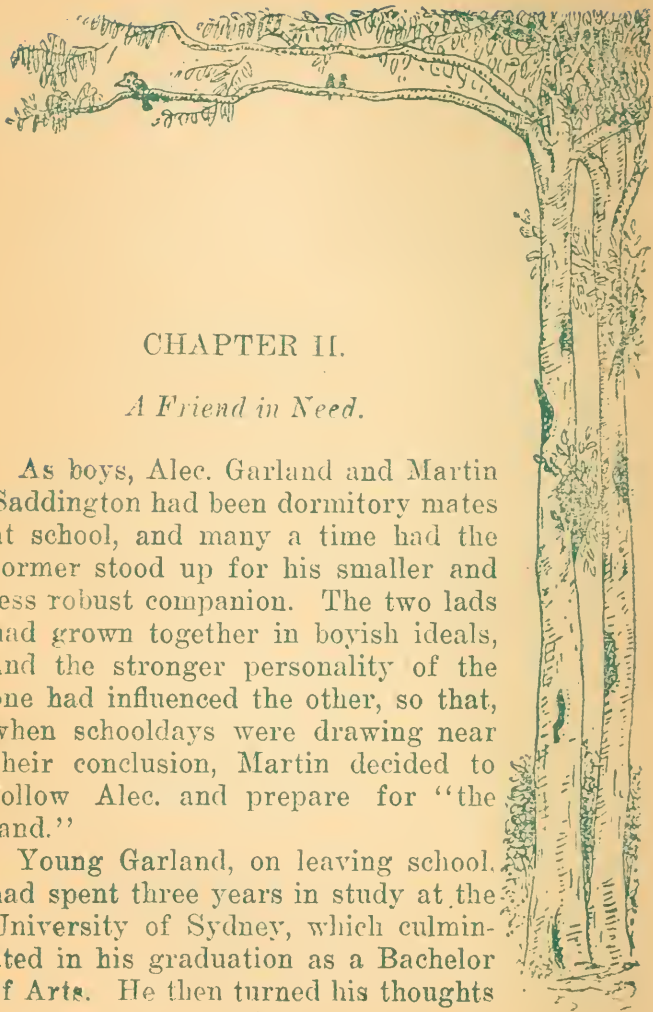
attention to "scrubbing," backed by plentiful rainfalls, which ranged from twenty-two to twenty-eight inches, had made it possible to graze flocks at the rate of a sheep on one to one and a half acres. The figures for the year, in which commenced the more engaging events for the younger folk of the station, read: horses 75; cattle 421; and sheep 42,500.

Among the modifications in the nature of the station, which now ranked well amongst private owned holdings in New South Wales, was one due to the making of closer settlement the subject of an Act of Parliament. It had been decided, to prevent the Government from resuming any portion of the holding, that a suitable area on the southern boundary be subdivided for mixed farming, and, ere now, the "share system" of tenure of small farms in return for half the products of each, in lieu of rental, had been eagerly availed of by many who had



not sufficient capital to finance a freehold.

But this had not taken from the original grant as much as did the disposal of twenty-five thousand acres on the extreme northern confines to Alexander Garland's greatest friend, Martin Saddington. And it came about in an interesting way.

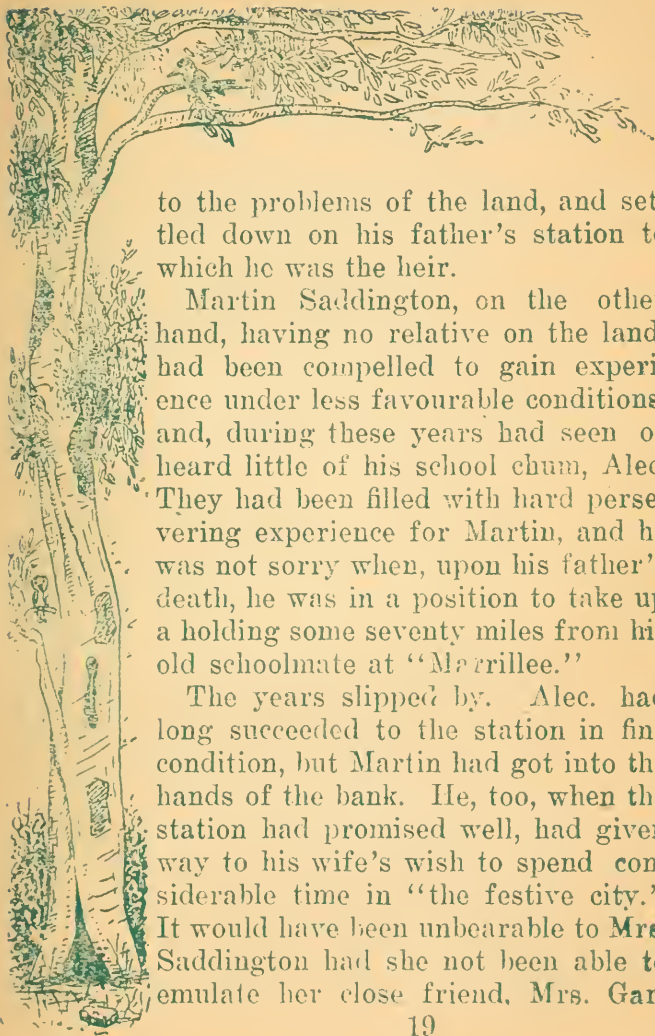


CHAPTER II.

A Friend in Need.

As boys, Alec. Garland and Martin Saddington had been dormitory mates at school, and many a time had the former stood up for his smaller and less robust companion. The two lads had grown together in boyish ideals, and the stronger personality of the one had influenced the other, so that, when schooldays were drawing near their conclusion, Martin decided to follow Alec. and prepare for "the land."

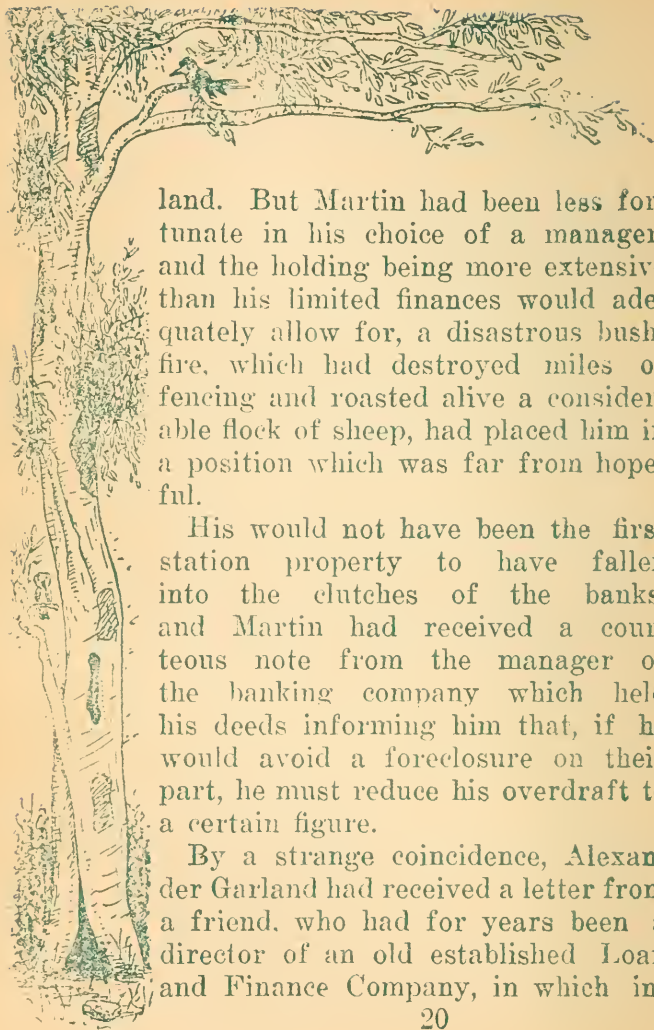
Young Garland, on leaving school, had spent three years in study at the University of Sydney, which culminated in his graduation as a Bachelor of Arts. He then turned his thoughts



to the problems of the land, and settled down on his father's station to which he was the heir.

Martin Saddington, on the other hand, having no relative on the land, had been compelled to gain experience under less favourable conditions, and, during these years had seen or heard little of his school chum, Alec. They had been filled with hard persevering experience for Martin, and he was not sorry when, upon his father's death, he was in a position to take up a holding some seventy miles from his old schoolmate at "Marrillee."


The years slipped by. Alec. had long succeeded to the station in fine condition, but Martin had got into the hands of the bank. He, too, when the station had promised well, had given way to his wife's wish to spend considerable time in "the festive city." It would have been unbearable to Mrs. Saddington had she not been able to emulate her close friend, Mrs. Gar-



land. But Martin had been less fortunate in his choice of a manager, and the holding being more extensive than his limited finances would adequately allow for, a disastrous bush-fire, which had destroyed miles of fencing and roasted alive a considerable flock of sheep, had placed him in a position which was far from hopeful.

His would not have been the first station property to have fallen into the clutches of the banks, and Martin had received a courteous note from the manager of the banking company which held his deeds informing him that, if he would avoid a foreclosure on their part, he must reduce his overdraft to a certain figure.

By a strange coincidence, Alexander Garland had received a letter from a friend, who had for years been a director of an old established Loan and Finance Company, in which in-



formation was sought relative to any available grazing property for cash purchase. At once the owner of "Merrillee" thought of his friend Saddington's property, and a brilliant idea struck him, which would enable him to carry out an old idea of his, and, at the same time, be worth while considering on the part of his old schoolmate.

Hence, we find him, within a few days, off to pay an unheralded visit to the Saddingtons.

"I am glad to see you, Alec," exclaimed Saddington as Garland drove up; "I've been very down in the dumps lately, and was coming over to see you, but here you are, hale and hearty, I hope, to see me."

It made Martin Saddington feel better to disclose his position in confidence to his old playmate, and the honour was not lost on the old grazier.

"Well, Martin old boy, look now," said Garland self-assuredly, "the fact

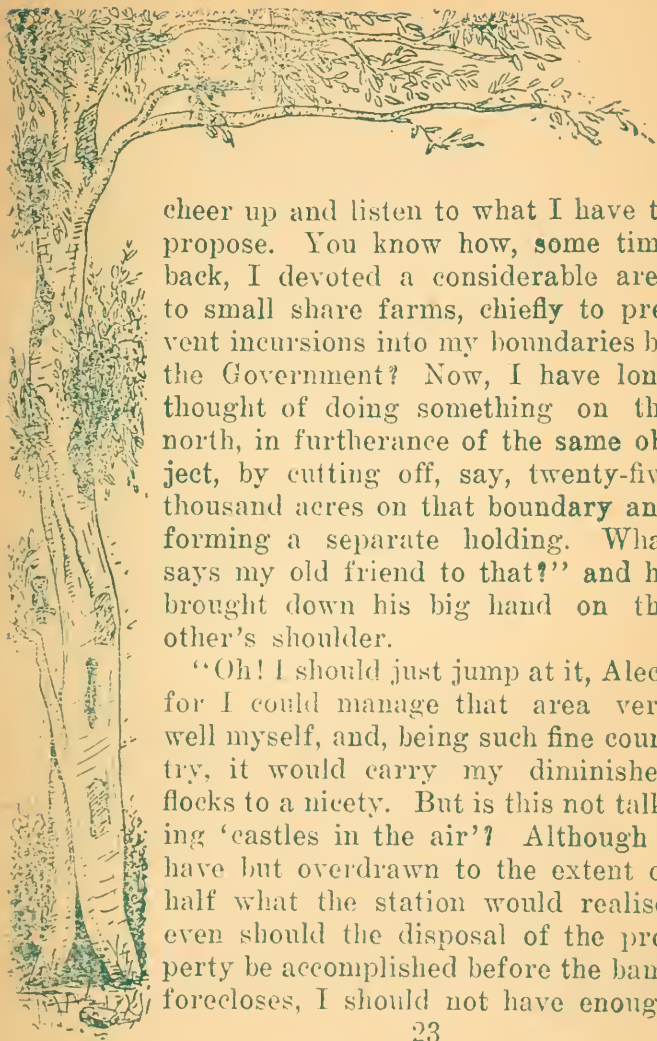


is you're too far away from me here. I think twenty miles away would be plenty. We'd see more of each other then, as we did at school, and we got along all right there, if I remember rightly."

The speaker had listened earnestly and with sympathy to the facts of his friend's failure, but, pleased within himself at the possibilities of what he was enigmatically hinting, his steadfast blue eyes smiled with that genial light which betokened a big heart within.

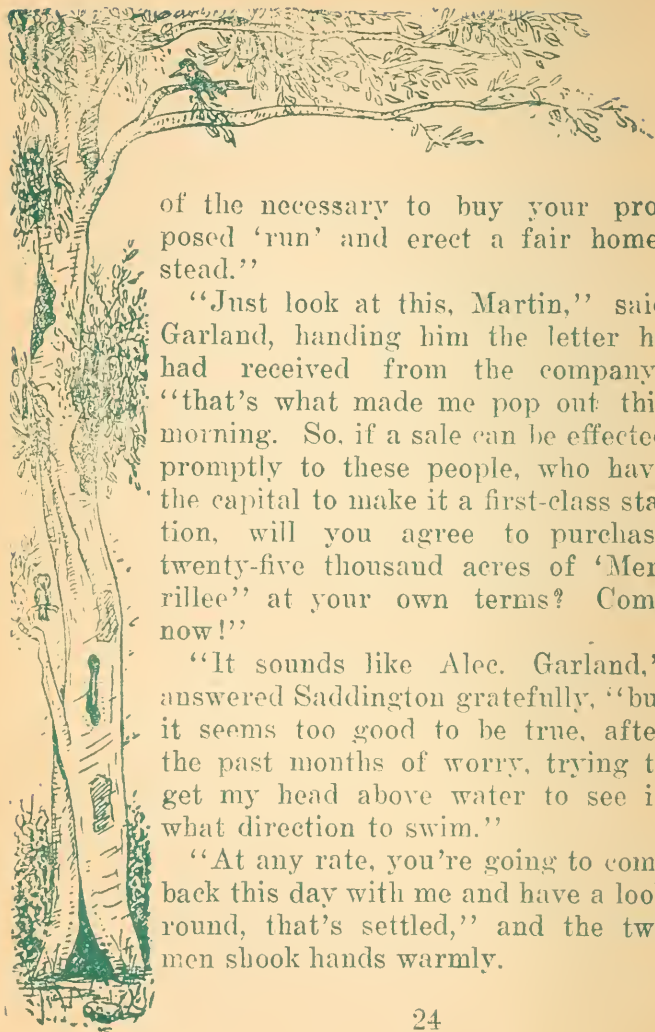
"What are you driving at?" observed Martin, with a puzzled expression on his countenance and a tinge of impatience in his voice. The subject of their conversation presented, at that juncture at least, no amusing phase for him.

Then Garland, coming to the point suddenly upon perceiving his friend's inappreciation of what he was at a loss to understand, continued: "Well,



cheer up and listen to what I have to propose. You know how, some time back, I devoted a considerable area to small share farms, chiefly to prevent incursions into my boundaries by the Government? Now, I have long thought of doing something on the north, in furtherance of the same object, by cutting off, say, twenty-five thousand acres on that boundary and forming a separate holding. What says my old friend to that?" and he brought down his big hand on the other's shoulder.

"Oh! I should just jump at it, Alec., for I could manage that area very well myself, and, being such fine country, it would carry my diminished flocks to a nicety. But is this not talking 'castles in the air'? Although I have but overdrawn to the extent of half what the station would realise, even should the disposal of the property be accomplished before the bank forecloses, I should not have enough

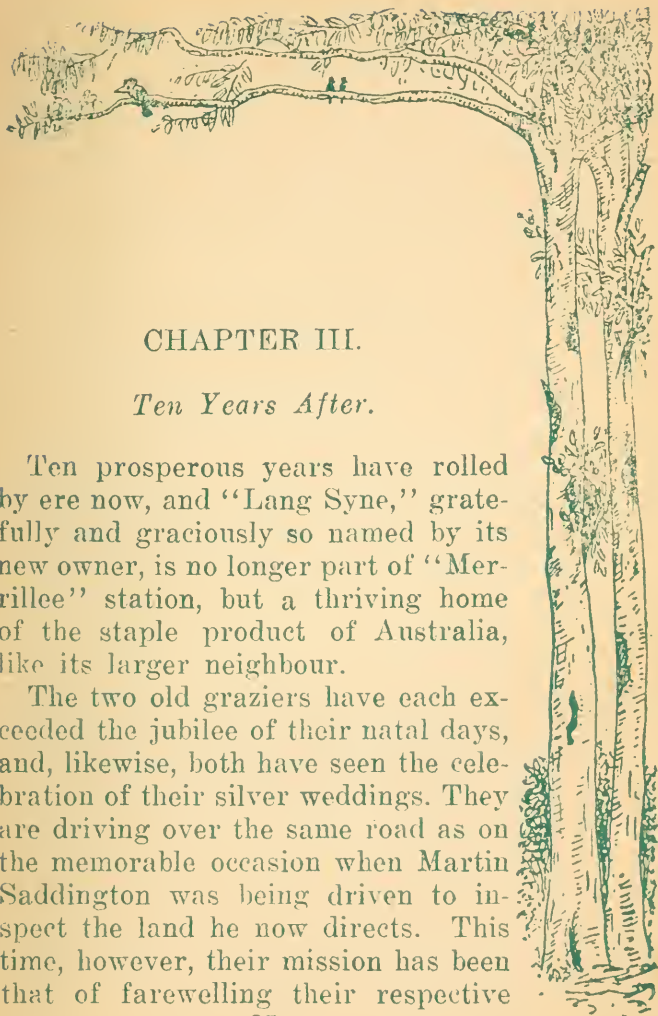


of the necessary to buy your proposed 'run' and erect a fair homestead."

"Just look at this, Martin," said Garland, handing him the letter he had received from the company; "that's what made me pop out this morning. So, if a sale can be effected promptly to these people, who have the capital to make it a first-class station, will you agree to purchase twenty-five thousand acres of 'Merrilee' at your own terms? Come now!"

"It sounds like Alec. Garland," answered Saddington gratefully, "but it seems too good to be true, after the past months of worry, trying to get my head above water to see in what direction to swim."

"At any rate, you're going to come back this day with me and have a look round, that's settled," and the two men shook hands warmly.

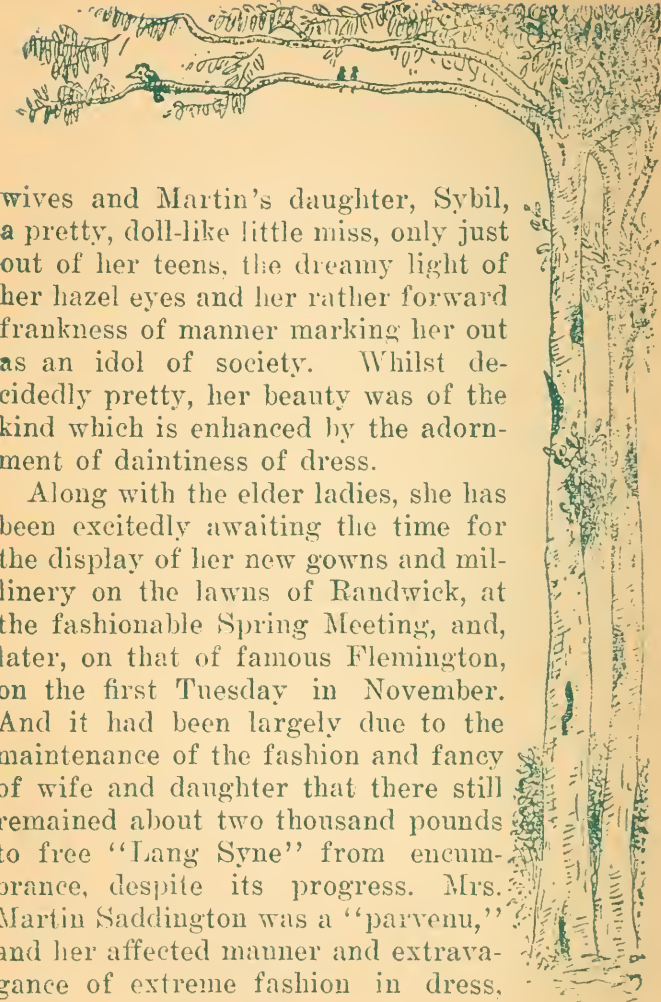


CHAPTER III.

Ten Years After.

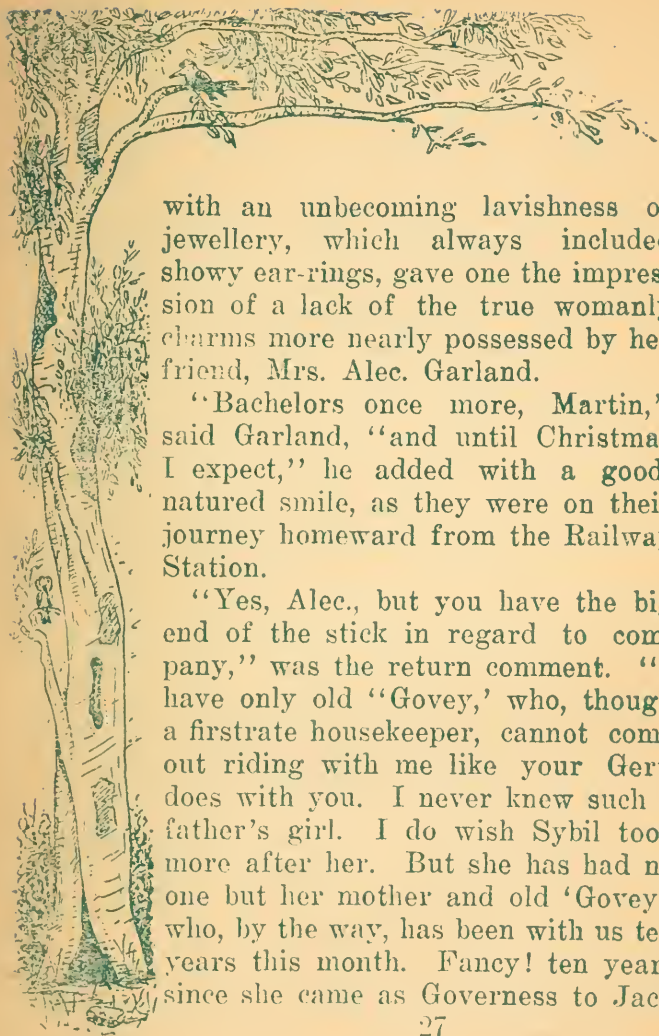
Ten prosperous years have rolled by ere now, and "Lang Syne," gratefully and graciously so named by its new owner, is no longer part of "Merrilee" station, but a thriving home of the staple product of Australia, like its larger neighbour.

The two old graziers have each exceeded the jubilee of their natal days, and, likewise, both have seen the celebration of their silver weddings. They are driving over the same road as on the memorable occasion when Martin Saddington was being driven to inspect the land he now directs. This time, however, their mission has been that of farewelling their respective



wives and Martin's daughter, Sybil, a pretty, doll-like little miss, only just out of her teens, the dreamy light of her hazel eyes and her rather forward frankness of manner marking her out as an idol of society. Whilst decidedly pretty, her beauty was of the kind which is enhanced by the adornment of daintiness of dress.

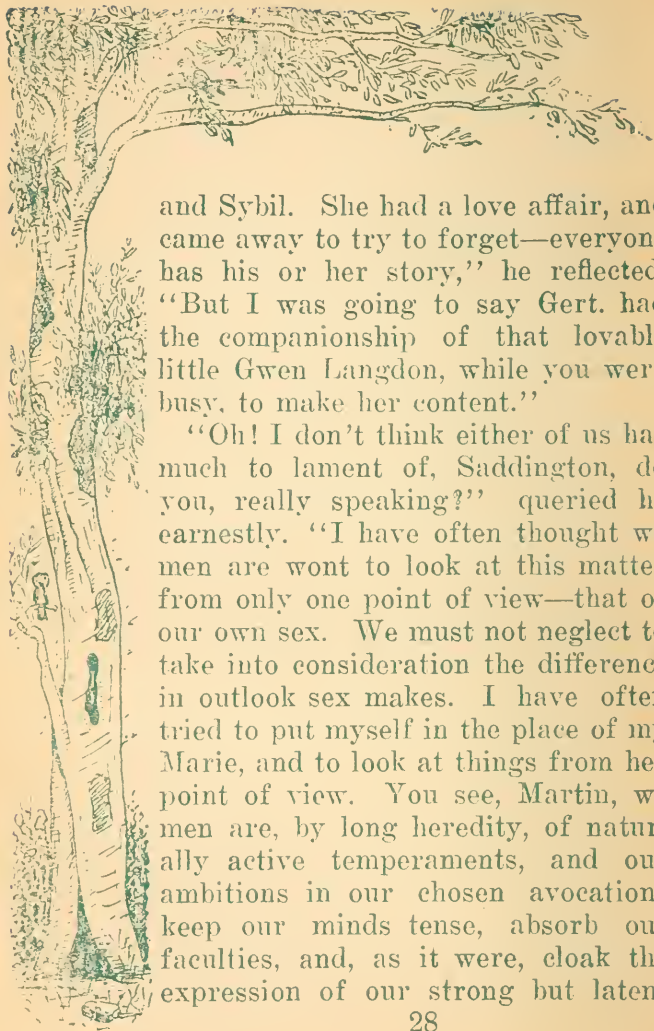
Along with the elder ladies, she has been excitedly awaiting the time for the display of her new gowns and millinery on the lawns of Randwick, at the fashionable Spring Meeting, and, later, on that of famous Flemington, on the first Tuesday in November. And it had been largely due to the maintenance of the fashion and fancy of wife and daughter that there still remained about two thousand pounds to free "Lang Syne" from encumbrance, despite its progress. Mrs. Martin Saddington was a "parvenu," and her affected manner and extravagance of extreme fashion in dress,



with an unbecoming lavishness of jewellery, which always included showy ear-rings, gave one the impression of a lack of the true womanly charms more nearly possessed by her friend, Mrs. Alec. Garland.

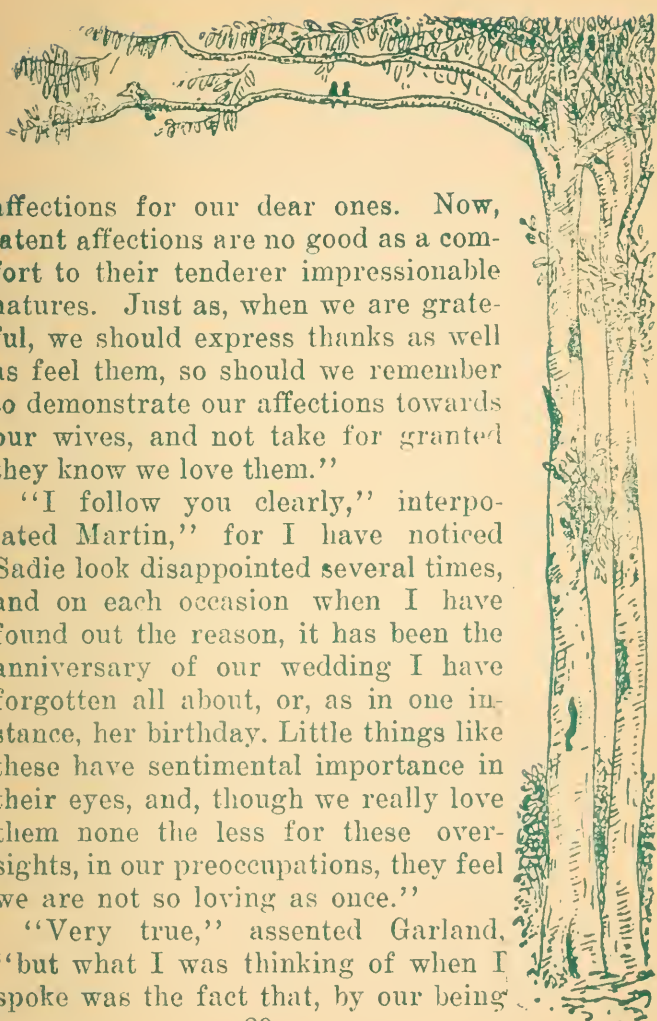
"Bachelors once more, Martin," said Garland, "and until Christmas I expect," he added with a good-natured smile, as they were on their journey homeward from the Railway Station.

"Yes, Alec., but you have the big end of the stick in regard to company," was the return comment. "I have only old 'Govey,' who, though a first-rate housekeeper, cannot come out riding with me like your Gert. does with you. I never knew such a father's girl. I do wish Sybil took more after her. But she has had no one but her mother and old 'Govey,' who, by the way, has been with us ten years this month. Fancy! ten years since she came as Governess to Jack



and Sybil. She had a love affair, and came away to try to forget—everyone has his or her story,” he reflected. “But I was going to say Gert. had the companionship of that lovable little Gwen Langdon, while you were busy, to make her content.”

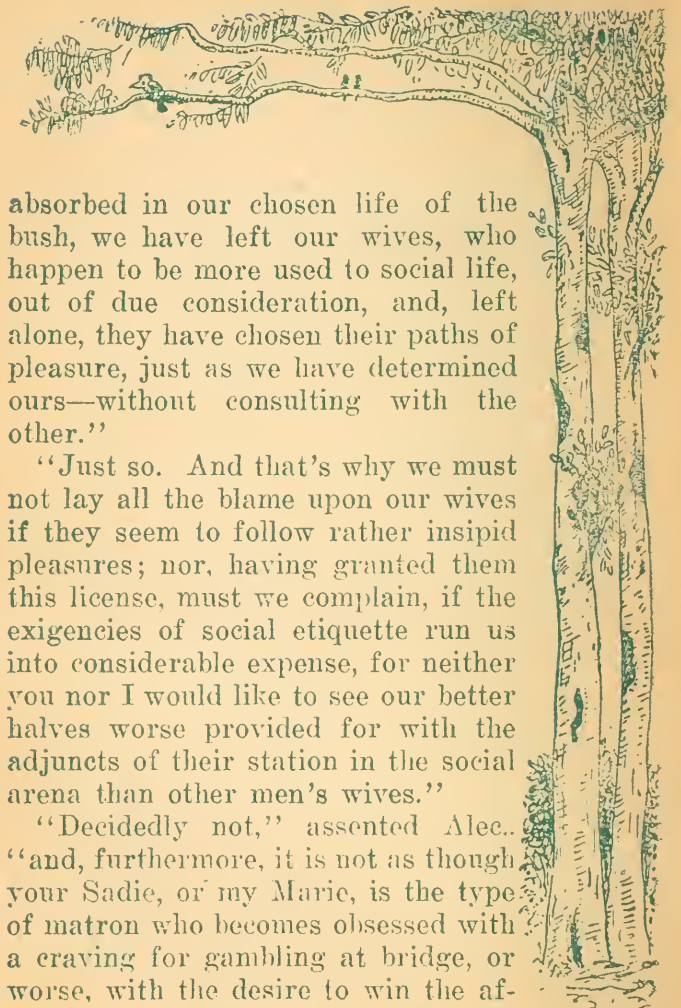
“Oh! I don’t think either of us has much to lament of, Saddington, do you, really speaking?” queried he earnestly. “I have often thought we men are wont to look at this matter from only one point of view—that of our own sex. We must not neglect to take into consideration the difference in outlook sex makes. I have often tried to put myself in the place of my Marie, and to look at things from her point of view. You see, Martin, we men are, by long heredity, of naturally active temperaments, and our ambitions in our chosen avocations keep our minds tense, absorb our faculties, and, as it were, cloak the expression of our strong but latent



affections for our dear ones. Now, latent affections are no good as a comfort to their tenderer impressionable natures. Just as, when we are grateful, we should express thanks as well as feel them, so should we remember to demonstrate our affections towards our wives, and not take for granted they know we love them."

"I follow you clearly," interpolated Martin," for I have noticed Sadie look disappointed several times, and on each occasion when I have found out the reason, it has been the anniversary of our wedding I have forgotten all about, or, as in one instance, her birthday. Little things like these have sentimental importance in their eyes, and, though we really love them none the less for these oversights, in our preoccupations, they feel we are not so loving as once."

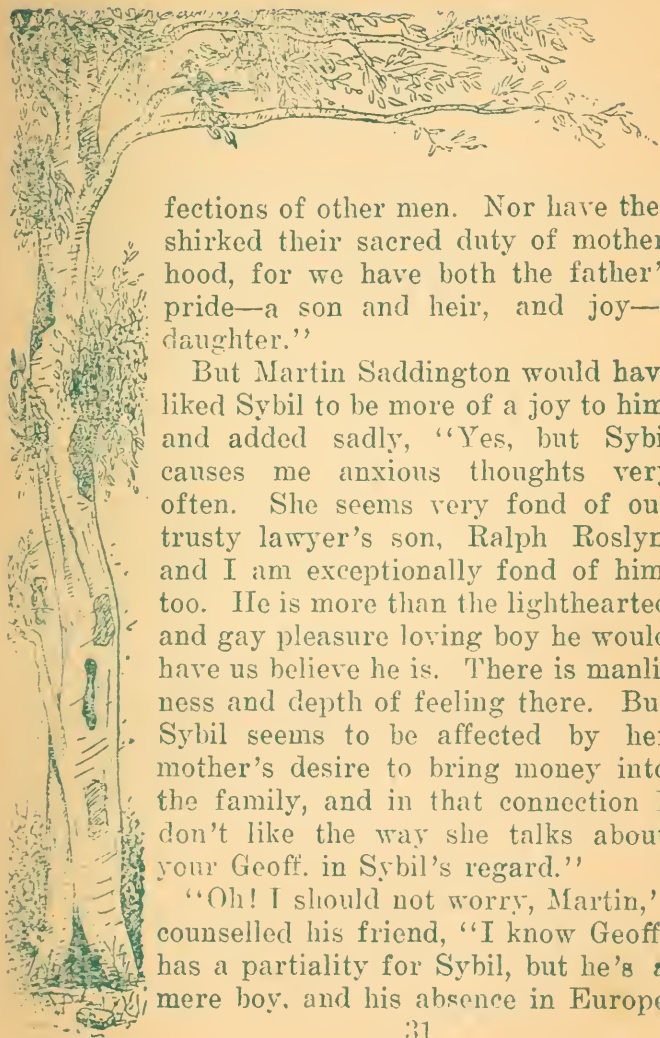
"Very true," assented Garland, "but what I was thinking of when I spoke was the fact that, by our being



absorbed in our chosen life of the bush, we have left our wives, who happen to be more used to social life, out of due consideration, and, left alone, they have chosen their paths of pleasure, just as we have determined ours—without consulting with the other.”

“Just so. And that’s why we must not lay all the blame upon our wives if they seem to follow rather insipid pleasures; nor, having granted them this license, must we complain, if the exigencies of social etiquette run us into considerable expense, for neither you nor I would like to see our better halves worse provided for with the adjuncts of their station in the social arena than other men’s wives.”

“Decidedly not,” assented Alec. “and, furthermore, it is not as though your Sadie, or my Marie, is the type of matron who becomes obsessed with a craving for gambling at bridge, or worse, with the desire to win the af-



fections of other men. Nor have they shirked their sacred duty of motherhood, for we have both the father's pride—a son and heir, and joy—a daughter."

But Martin Saddington would have liked Sybil to be more of a joy to him, and added sadly, "Yes, but Sybil causes me anxious thoughts very often. She seems very fond of our trusty lawyer's son, Ralph Roslyn, and I am exceptionally fond of him, too. He is more than the lighthearted and gay pleasure loving boy he would have us believe he is. There is manliness and depth of feeling there. But Sybil seems to be affected by her mother's desire to bring money into the family, and in that connection I don't like the way she talks about your Geoff. in Sybil's regard."

"Oh! I should not worry, Martin," counselled his friend, "I know Geoff. has a partiality for Sybil, but he's a mere boy, and his absence in Europe

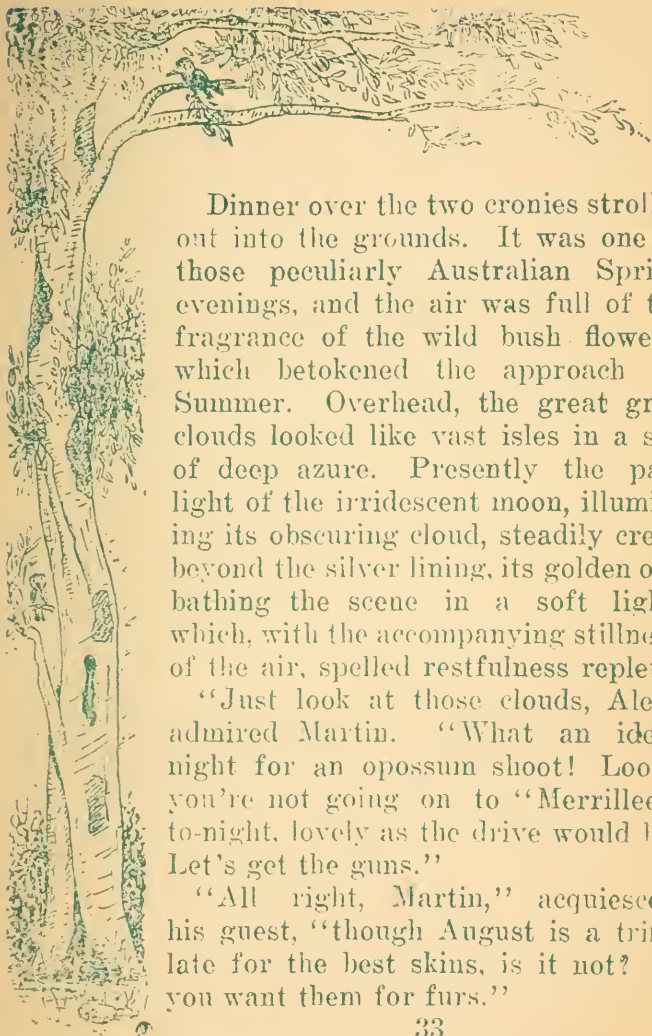


for a couple of years after Christmas will strengthen or break any bond of affection between them; though of marriage I'm sure Geoff. has not yet thought."

"Jack will be great company for me. He completes his course at the Agricultural College this year, and is a sensible boy, intending to make good while he is young so that he may be fully pledged ere I drop the responsibility of "Lang Syne" on his young shoulders."

"Let me see," reflected Garland, "Geoff. is three years Jack's senior, which makes Jack eighteen. How time flies!"

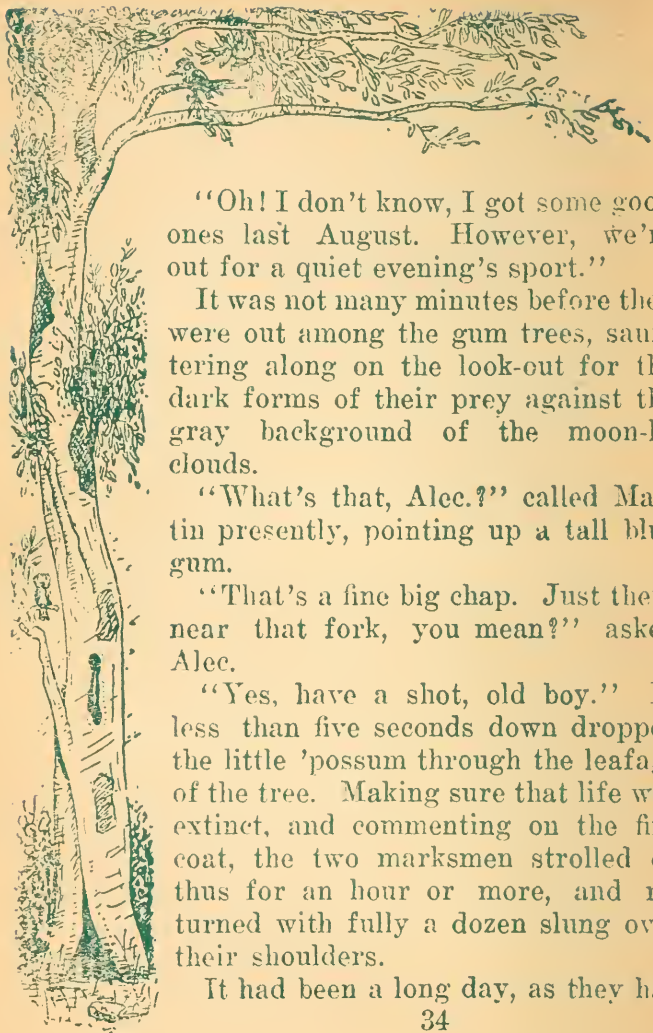
The gates of "Lang Syne" were now in sight, and, ere a few minutes had elapsed, our travellers were entering the dining hall to partake of true Australian hospitality, for which their appetites had been whetted by the healthy drive in the crisp air of an early spring.



Dinner over the two cronies strolled out into the grounds. It was one of those peculiarly Australian Spring evenings, and the air was full of the fragrance of the wild bush flowers, which betokened the approach of Summer. Overhead, the great grey clouds looked like vast isles in a sea of deep azure. Presently the pale light of the iridescent moon, illuminating its obscuring cloud, steadily crept beyond the silver lining, its golden orb bathing the scene in a soft light, which, with the accompanying stillness of the air, spelled restfulness replete.

"Just look at those clouds, Alec," admired Martin. "What an ideal night for an opossum shoot! Look! you're not going on to "Merrillee" to-night, lovely as the drive would be. Let's get the guns."

"All right, Martin," acquiesced his guest, "though August is a trifle late for the best skins, is it not? If you want them for furs."



"Oh! I don't know, I got some good ones last August. However, we're out for a quiet evening's sport."

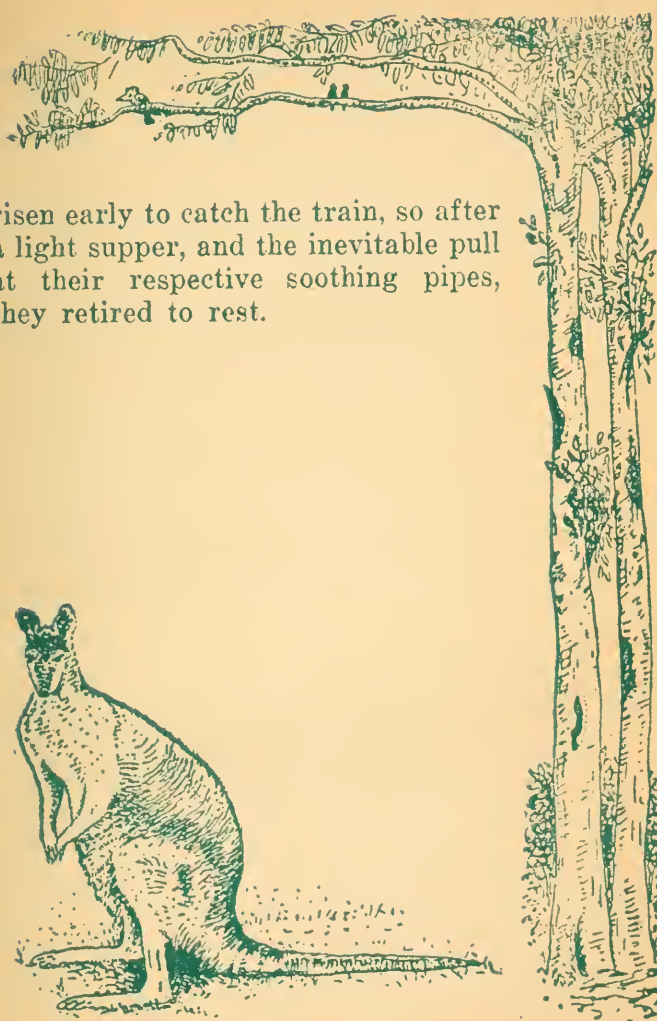
It was not many minutes before they were out among the gum trees, sauntering along on the look-out for the dark forms of their prey against the gray background of the moon-lit clouds.

"What's that, Alec.?" called Martin presently, pointing up a tall blue gum.

"That's a fine big chap. Just there near that fork, you mean?" asked Alec.

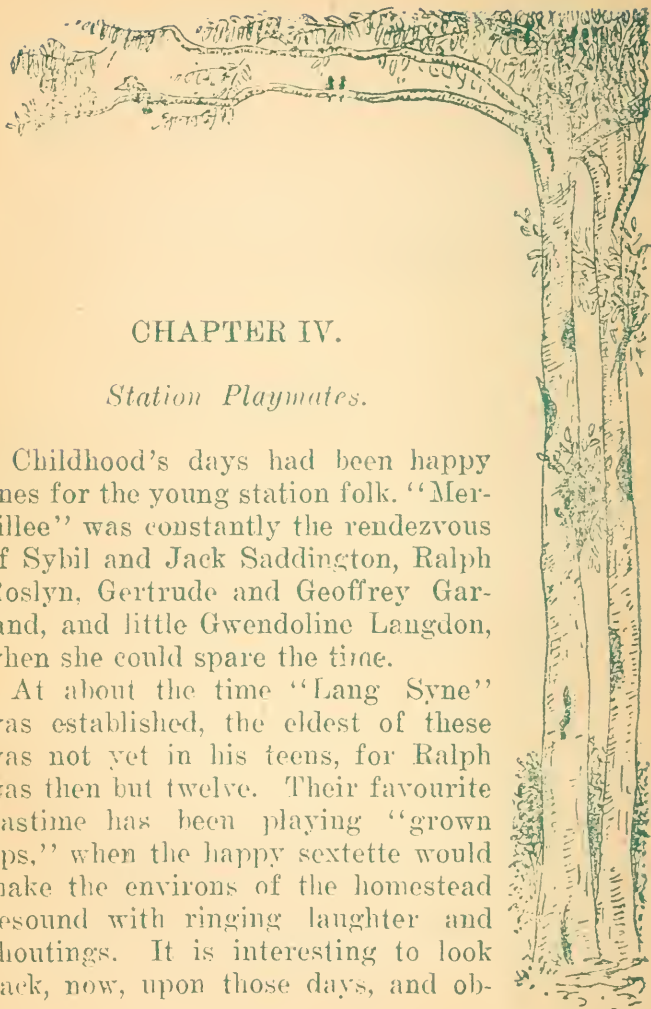
"Yes, have a shot, old boy." In less than five seconds down dropped the little 'possum through the leafage of the tree. Making sure that life was extinct, and commenting on the fine coat, the two marksmen strolled on thus for an hour or more, and returned with fully a dozen slung over their shoulders.

It had been a long day, as they had



risen early to catch the train, so after
a light supper, and the inevitable pull
at their respective soothing pipes,
they retired to rest.



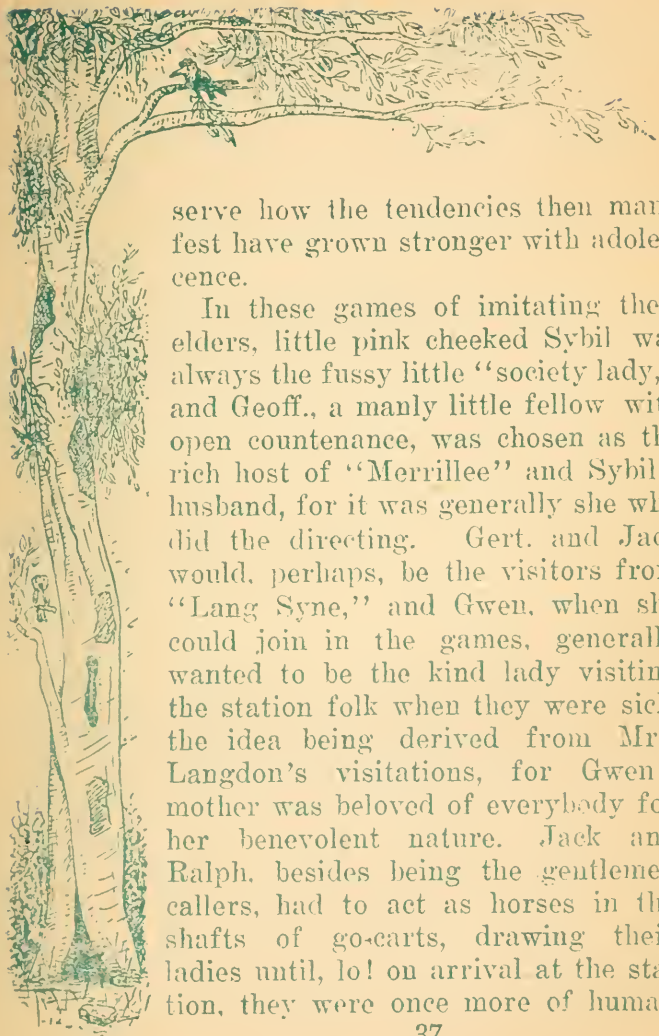


CHAPTER IV.

Station Playmates.

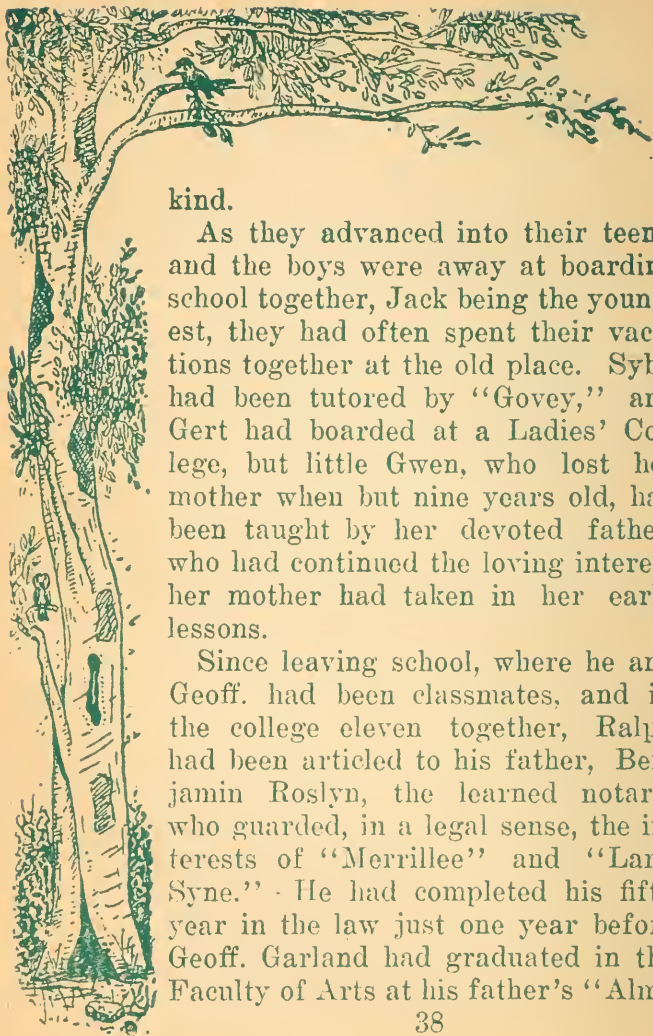
Childhood's days had been happy ones for the young station folk. "Merrilee" was constantly the rendezvous of Sybil and Jack Saddington, Ralph Roslyn, Gertrude and Geoffrey Garland, and little Gwendoline Langdon, when she could spare the time.

At about the time "Lang Syne" was established, the eldest of these was not yet in his teens, for Ralph was then but twelve. Their favourite pastime has been playing "grown ups," when the happy sextette would make the environs of the homestead resound with ringing laughter and shoutings. It is interesting to look back, now, upon those days, and ob-



serve how the tendencies then manifest have grown stronger with adolescence.

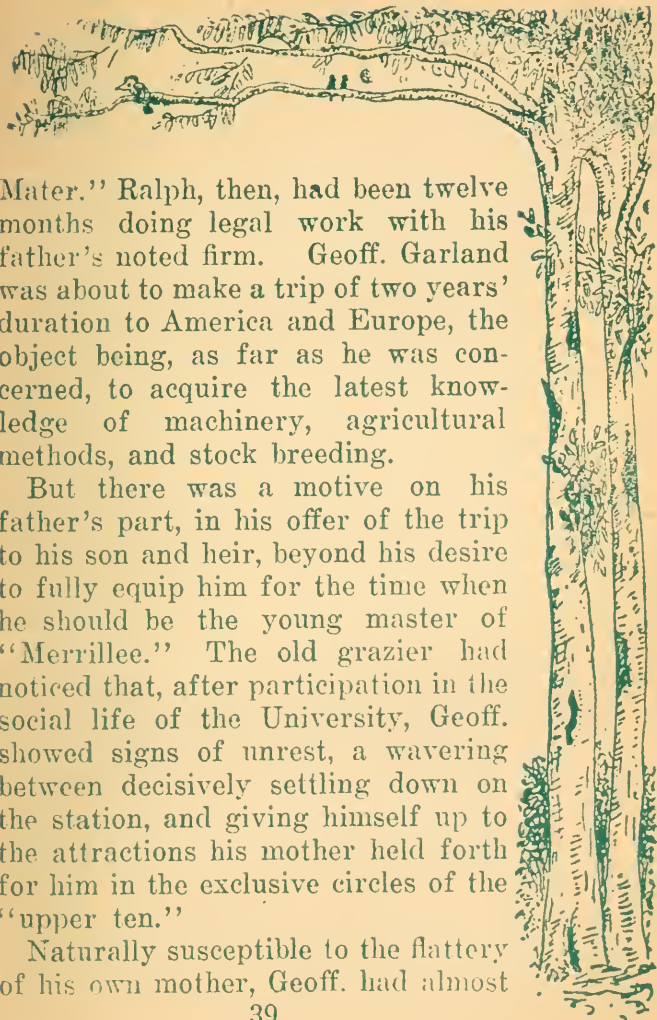
In these games of imitating their elders, little pink cheeked Sybil was always the fussy little "society lady," and Geoff., a manly little fellow with open countenance, was chosen as the rich host of "Merrilee" and Sybil's husband, for it was generally she who did the directing. Gert. and Jack would, perhaps, be the visitors from "Lang Syne," and Gwen, when she could join in the games, generally wanted to be the kind lady visiting the station folk when they were sick, the idea being derived from Mrs. Langdon's visitations, for Gwen's mother was beloved of everybody for her benevolent nature. Jack and Ralph, besides being the gentlemen callers, had to act as horses in the shafts of go-carts, drawing their ladies until, lo! on arrival at the station, they were once more of human



kind.

As they advanced into their teens, and the boys were away at boarding school together, Jack being the youngest, they had often spent their vacations together at the old place. Sybil had been tutored by "Govey," and Gert had boarded at a Ladies' College, but little Gwen, who lost her mother when but nine years old, had been taught by her devoted father, who had continued the loving interest her mother had taken in her early lessons.

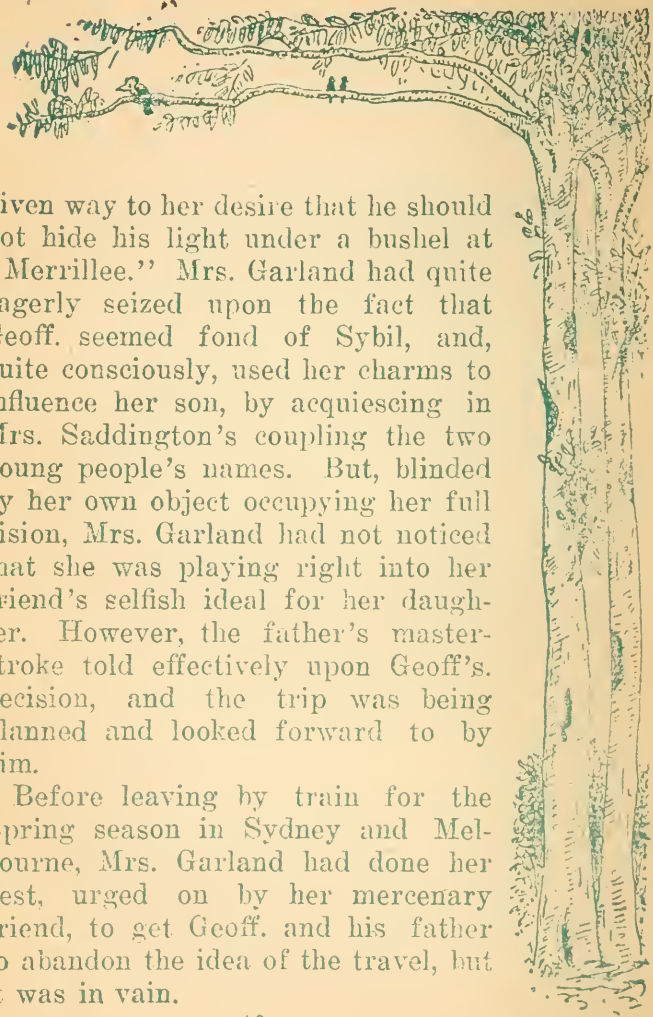
Since leaving school, where he and Geoff. had been classmates, and in the college eleven together, Ralph had been articled to his father, Benjamin Roslyn, the learned notary, who guarded, in a legal sense, the interests of "Merrilee" and "Lang Syne." - He had completed his fifth year in the law just one year before Geoff. Garland had graduated in the Faculty of Arts at his father's "Alma



Mater." Ralph, then, had been twelve months doing legal work with his father's noted firm. Geoff. Garland was about to make a trip of two years' duration to America and Europe, the object being, as far as he was concerned, to acquire the latest knowledge of machinery, agricultural methods, and stock breeding.

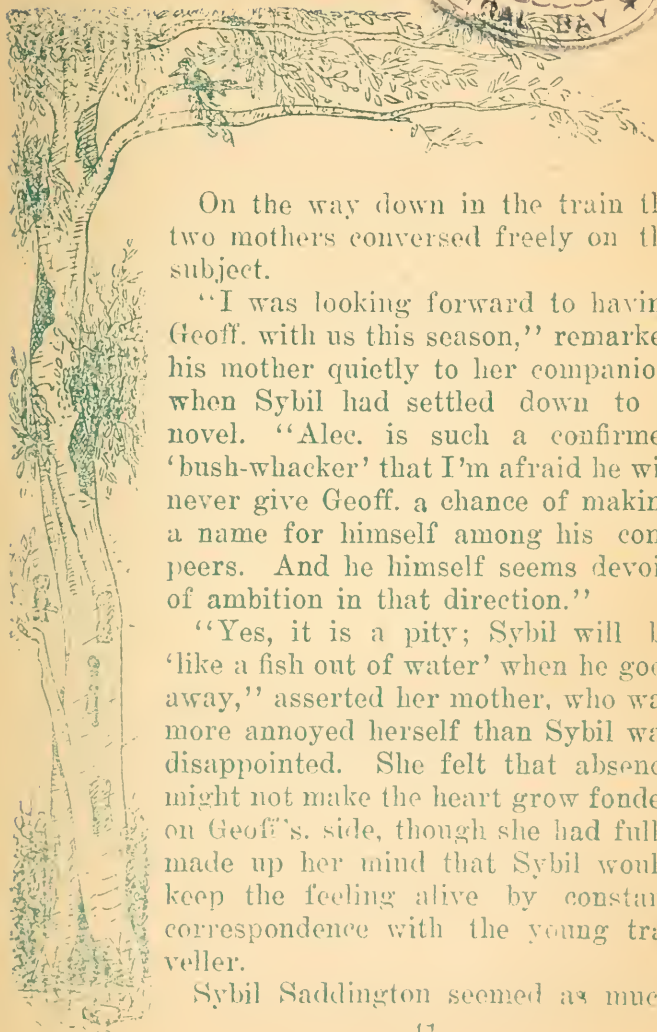
But there was a motive on his father's part, in his offer of the trip to his son and heir, beyond his desire to fully equip him for the time when he should be the young master of "Merrillee." The old grazier had noticed that, after participation in the social life of the University, Geoff. showed signs of unrest, a wavering between decisively settling down on the station, and giving himself up to the attractions his mother held forth for him in the exclusive circles of the "upper ten."

Naturally susceptible to the flattery of his own mother, Geoff. had almost



given way to her desire that he should not hide his light under a bushel at "Merrillee." Mrs. Garland had quite eagerly seized upon the fact that Geoff. seemed fond of Sybil, and, quite consciously, used her charms to influence her son, by acquiescing in Mrs. Saddington's coupling the two young people's names. But, blinded by her own object occupying her full vision, Mrs. Garland had not noticed that she was playing right into her friend's selfish ideal for her daughter. However, the father's master-stroke told effectively upon Geoff's. decision, and the trip was being planned and looked forward to by him.

Before leaving by train for the Spring season in Sydney and Melbourne, Mrs. Garland had done her best, urged on by her mercenary friend, to get Geoff. and his father to abandon the idea of the travel, but it was in vain.

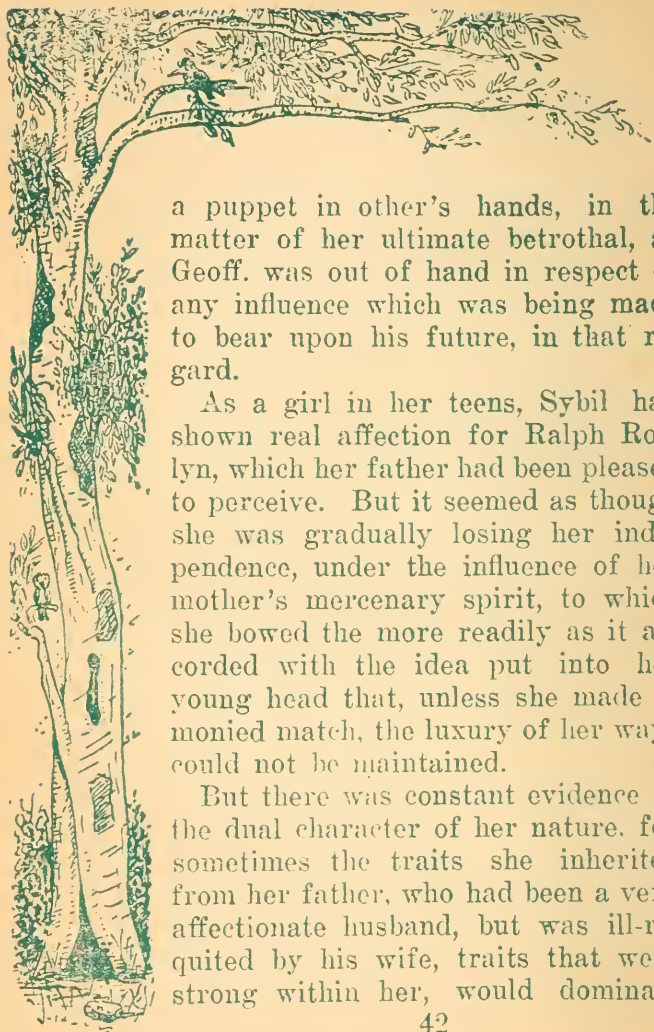


On the way down in the train the two mothers conversed freely on the subject.

"I was looking forward to having Geoff. with us this season," remarked his mother quietly to her companion, when Sybil had settled down to a novel. "Alec. is such a confirmed 'bush-whacker' that I'm afraid he will never give Geoff. a chance of making a name for himself among his compeers. And he himself seems devoid of ambition in that direction."

"Yes, it is a pity; Sybil will be 'like a fish out of water' when he goes away," asserted her mother, who was more annoyed herself than Sybil was disappointed. She felt that absence might not make the heart grow fonder on Geoff.'s. side, though she had fully made up her mind that Sybil would keep the feeling alive by constant correspondence with the young traveller.

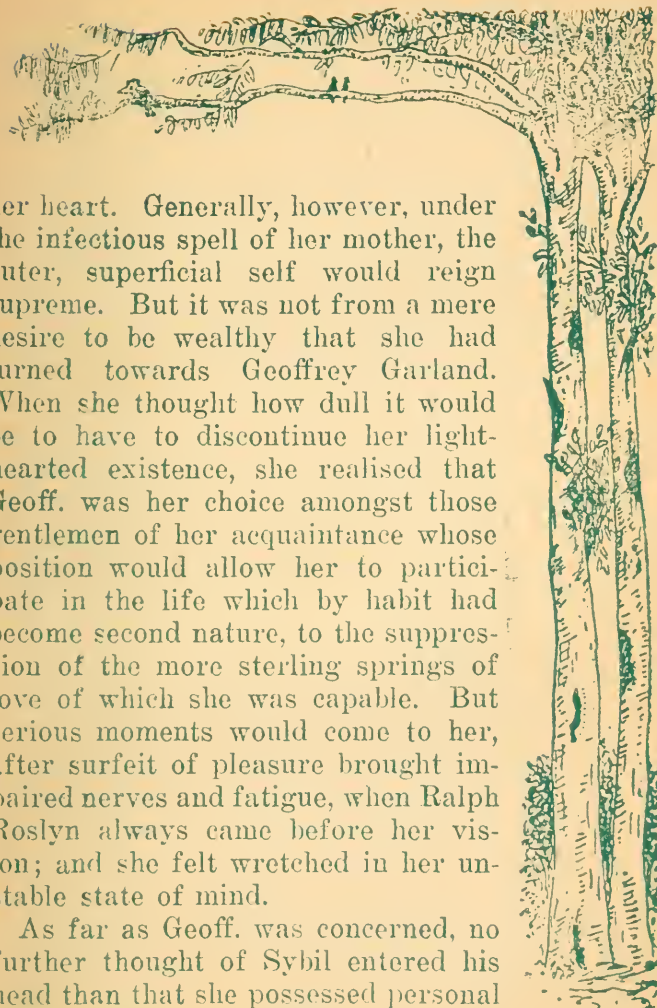
Sybil Saddington seemed as much



a puppet in other's hands, in the matter of her ultimate betrothal, as Geoff. was out of hand in respect of any influence which was being made to bear upon his future, in that regard.

As a girl in her teens, Sybil had shown real affection for Ralph Roslyn, which her father had been pleased to perceive. But it seemed as though she was gradually losing her independence, under the influence of her mother's mercenary spirit, to which she bowed the more readily as it accorded with the idea put into her young head that, unless she made a monied match, the luxury of her ways could not be maintained.

But there was constant evidence of the dual character of her nature, for sometimes the traits she inherited from her father, who had been a very affectionate husband, but was ill-requited by his wife, traits that were strong within her, would dominate

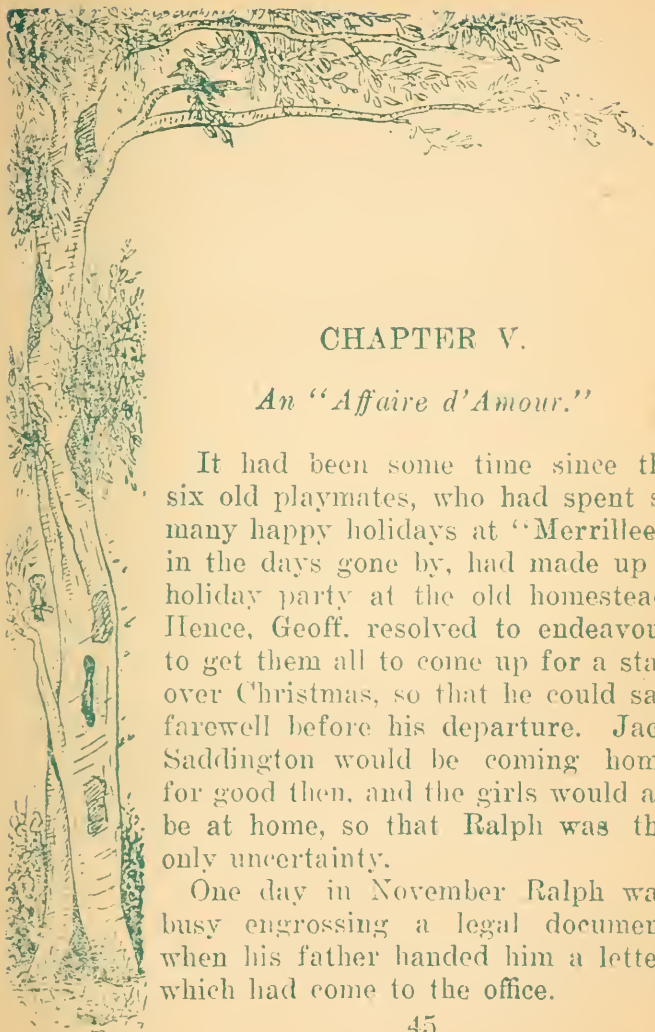


her heart. Generally, however, under the infectious spell of her mother, the outer, superficial self would reign supreme. But it was not from a mere desire to be wealthy that she had turned towards Geoffrey Garland. When she thought how dull it would be to have to discontinue her light-hearted existence, she realised that Geoff. was her choice amongst those gentlemen of her acquaintance whose position would allow her to participate in the life which by habit had become second nature, to the suppression of the more sterling springs of love of which she was capable. But serious moments would come to her, after surfeit of pleasure brought impaired nerves and fatigue, when Ralph Roslyn always came before her vision; and she felt wretched in her unstable state of mind.

As far as Geoff. was concerned, no further thought of Sybil entered his head than that she possessed personal

charms to which he was partial, and that he generally enjoyed her lively company. But he was a youth who left a lot, unconsciously perhaps, to Providence, and was not settled enough to think of matrimony.



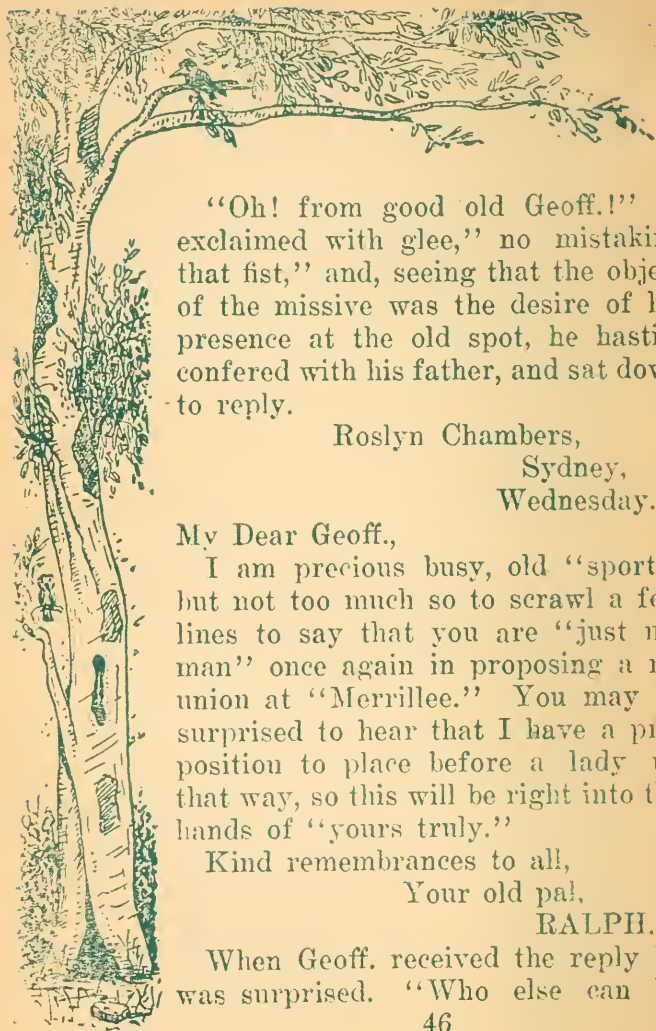


CHAPTER V.

An "Affaire d'Amour."

It had been some time since the six old playmates, who had spent so many happy holidays at "Merrillee" in the days gone by, had made up a holiday party at the old homestead. Hence, Geoff. resolved to endeavour to get them all to come up for a stay over Christmas, so that he could say farewell before his departure. Jack Saddington would be coming home for good then, and the girls would all be at home, so that Ralph was the only uncertainty.

One day in November Ralph was busy engrossing a legal document when his father handed him a letter which had come to the office.



"Oh! from good old Geoff.!" he exclaimed with glee," no mistaking that fist," and, seeing that the object of the missive was the desire of his presence at the old spot, he hastily conferred with his father, and sat down to reply.

Roslyn Chambers,
Sydney,
Wednesday.

My Dear Geoff.,

I am precious busy, old "sport," but not too much so to scrawl a few lines to say that you are "just my man" once again in proposing a reunion at "Merrillee." You may be surprised to hear that I have a proposition to place before a lady up that way, so this will be right into the hands of "yours truly."

Kind remembrances to all,
Your old pal,

RALPH.

When Geoff. received the reply he was surprised. "Who else can he



mean but Sybil," he said to himself, and before he was aware of it a curious feeling came over him. He was jealous of his old chum as a claimant for Sybil's hand.

Geoff. and Sybil had been like brother and sister, and the suddenness of this news made him realise what he had not dreamt of before—that he, too, loved Sybil, for the moment at any rate. It made him stop to think. He had made a definite decision to go abroad for two whole years, during which time he would not see Sybil, but that aspect of his travels had not even occurred to him. Yet now he felt so strange that he questioned whether it was love for Sybil or jealousy of Ralph which caused it all. Both feelings had hitherto been far from him. However, his regard for his old mate, and his way of leaving matters indefinitely to Providence, restored his equilibrium, and he went off whistling, for he noticed his sister



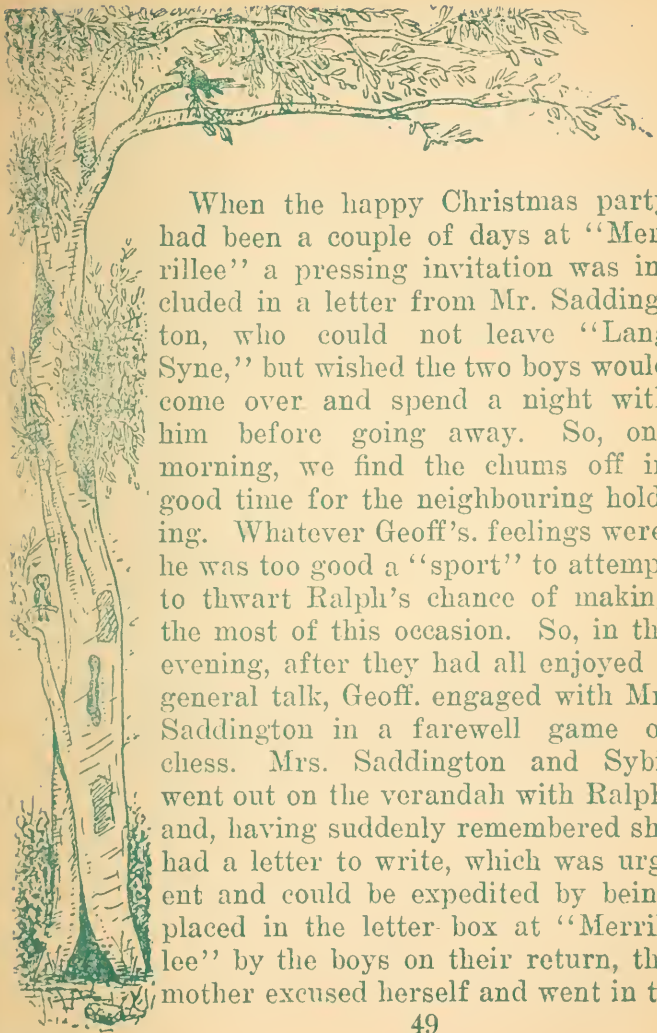


Gert. had seen his momentary perturbation after handing her the letter.

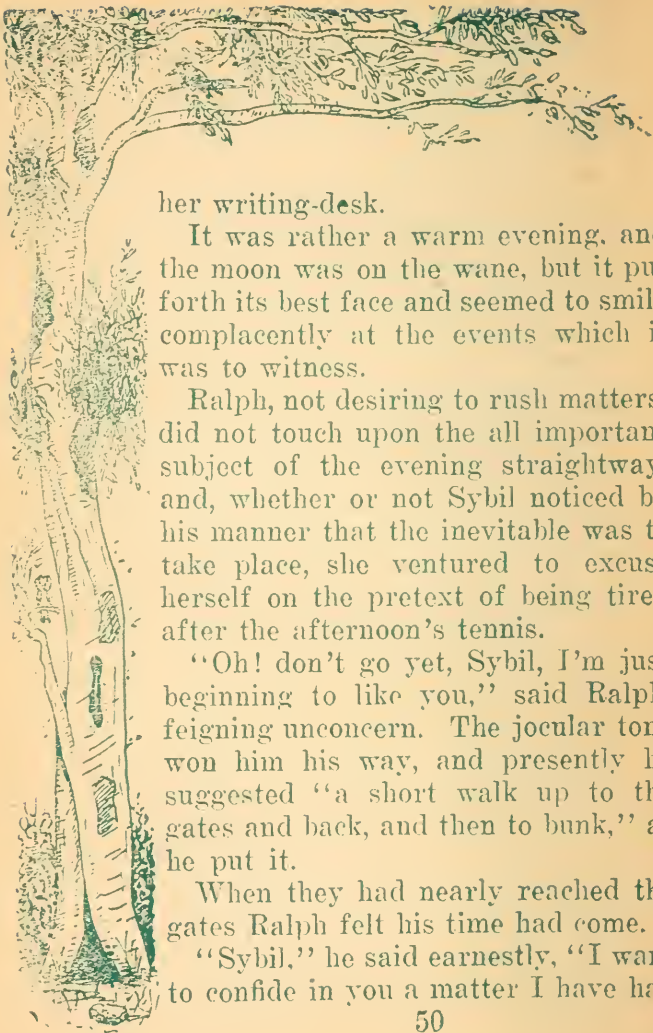
"I wonder whether Sybil has any true regard for him?" Geoff. questioned, when his thoughts recurred later in the day. "It seems like a dream to me, and I don't like to think of the possibility of his being disappointed. He would take it so to heart."

Ralph had the confidence that Mr. Saddington would be pleased to hear of his suit for his daughter's hand, and he had always nursed a growing affection for Sybil. He was outwardly, at least, more of her style than Geoff. was, and was ambitious to cut a figure in society. The hopes of success in his love-making had been a constant stimulus in his studies, and the fact that his father had taken him into partnership, as a full member of the reputed firm, had made him feel that he could now ask Sybil to marry him.





When the happy Christmas party had been a couple of days at "Merrilee" a pressing invitation was included in a letter from Mr. Saddington, who could not leave "Lang Syne," but wished the two boys would come over and spend a night with him before going away. So, one morning, we find the chums off in good time for the neighbouring holding. Whatever Geoff's feelings were, he was too good a "sport" to attempt to thwart Ralph's chance of making the most of this occasion. So, in the evening, after they had all enjoyed a general talk, Geoff. engaged with Mr. Saddington in a farewell game of chess. Mrs. Saddington and Sybil went out on the verandah with Ralph, and, having suddenly remembered she had a letter to write, which was urgent and could be expedited by being placed in the letter-box at "Merrilee" by the boys on their return, the mother excused herself and went in to



her writing-desk.


It was rather a warm evening, and the moon was on the wane, but it put forth its best face and seemed to smile complacently at the events which it was to witness.

Ralph, not desiring to rush matters, did not touch upon the all important subject of the evening straightway, and, whether or not Sybil noticed by his manner that the inevitable was to take place, she ventured to excuse herself on the pretext of being tired after the afternoon's tennis.

"Oh! don't go yet, Sybil, I'm just beginning to like you," said Ralph, feigning unconcern. The jocular tone won him his way, and presently he suggested "a short walk up to the gates and back, and then to bunk," as he put it.

When they had nearly reached the gates Ralph felt his time had come.

"Sybil," he said earnestly, "I want to confide in you a matter I have had



on my mind for a long while now. You know, little girl, I have been working hard all through my articles, and have done so well that I am now a practising member of the firm—and all through it has been the love of a dear little sweetheart that has spurred me on to success.”

“Oh! how romantic!” exclaimed Sybil, “why, it sounds like a novel!”

“And what would you say if I told you that she is-er-beside me now?” continued Ralph.

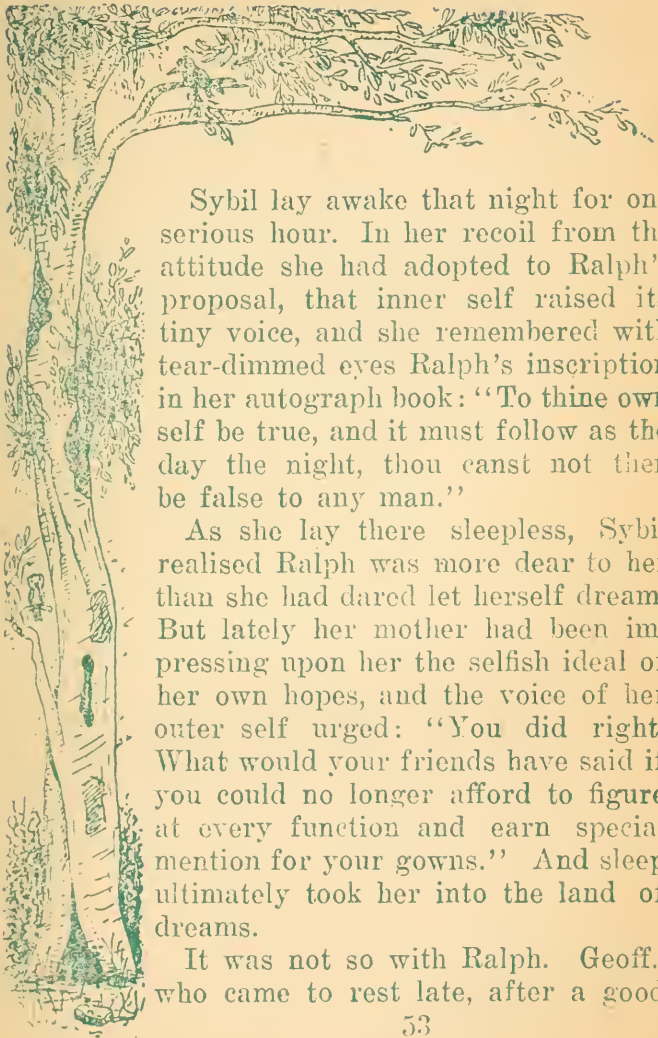
“Me?” ejaculated she; “Ralph, you’re joking. Really, I have lots of time to think of marriage yet, and you know how fond I am of my freedom. It would take a millionaire to keep me in pin-money. But, there, you *are* joking. The silly old moon has been affecting you.”

Ralph almost reeled under the shock her answer gave him, for he had thought Sybil easy of conquest. Her answer, much as she had tried,



in an impromptu way, to turn the question aside jovially, had nevertheless conveyed the idea that Sybil was thinking primarily of the inadequacy of Ralph's income to meet the calls she would need to make upon it. This wounded the pride her lover had felt in having succeeded well enough to be able to marry comfortably, and he felt, as only a man, who has offered his all to the woman he loves and been refused, can feel.

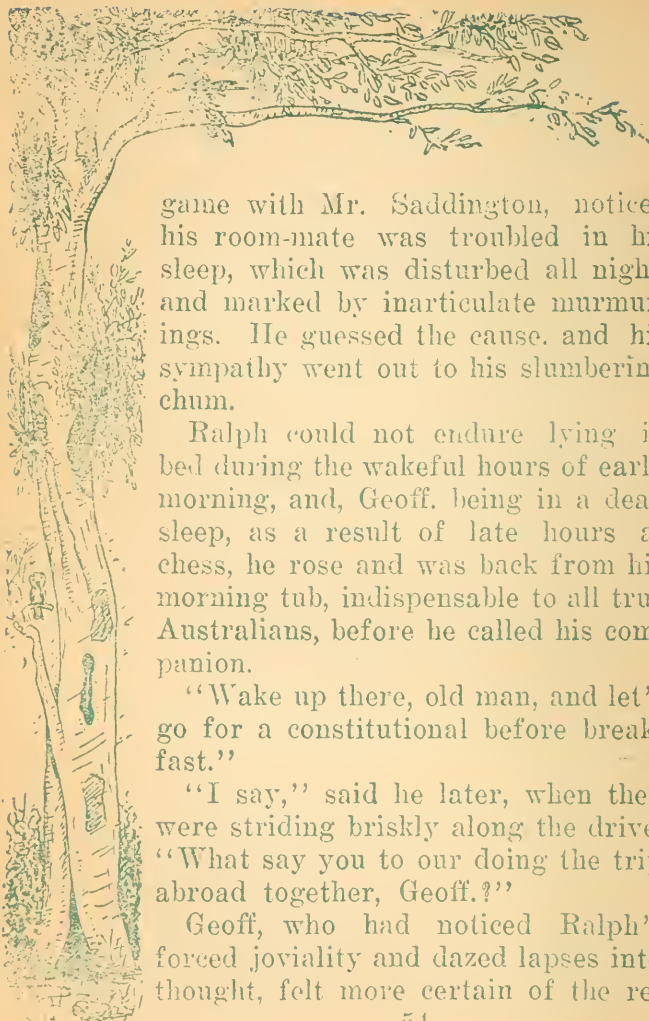
"Stop, Sybil, stop! I was *not* joking. But I was wrong. I did not think," he cried. They walked on in silence the few paces which brought them to the verandah once more, when, manfully extending his right hand, he said, as he shook her's firmly: "Good night, Sybil, let us just be friends;" but the last words were not articulate, for a lump that would not be repressed arose and stifled them, and Sybil quickly left him, and retired.



Sybil lay awake that night for one serious hour. In her recoil from the attitude she had adopted to Ralph's proposal, that inner self raised its tiny voice, and she remembered with tear-dimmed eyes Ralph's inscription in her autograph book: "To thine own self be true, and it must follow as the day the night, thou canst not then be false to any man."

As she lay there sleepless, Sybil realised Ralph was more dear to her than she had dared let herself dream. But lately her mother had been impressing upon her the selfish ideal of her own hopes, and the voice of her outer self urged: "You did right. What would your friends have said if you could no longer afford to figure at every function and earn special mention for your gowns." And sleep ultimately took her into the land of dreams.

It was not so with Ralph. Geoff., who came to rest late, after a good



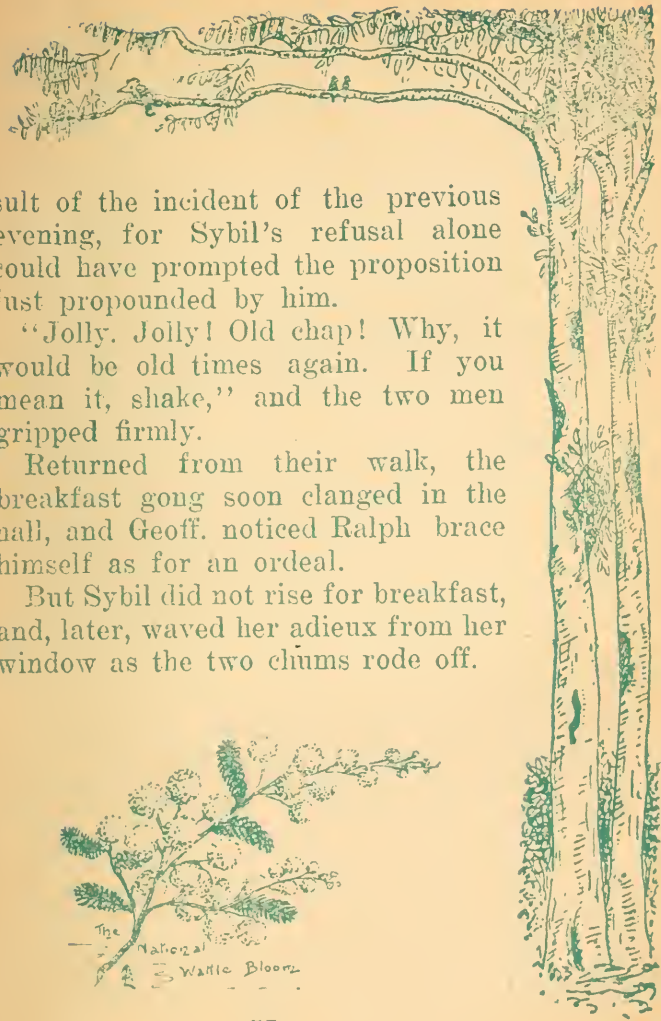
game with Mr. Saddington, noticed his room-mate was troubled in his sleep, which was disturbed all night, and marked by inarticulate murmurings. He guessed the cause, and his sympathy went out to his slumbering chum.

Ralph could not endure lying in bed during the wakeful hours of early morning, and, Geoff. being in a dead sleep, as a result of late hours at chess, he rose and was back from his morning tub, indispensable to all true Australians, before he called his companion.

"Wake up there, old man, and let's go for a constitutional before breakfast."

"I say," said he later, when they were striding briskly along the drive. "What say you to our doing the trip abroad together, Geoff.?"

Geoff, who had noticed Ralph's forced joviality and dazed lapses into thought, felt more certain of the re-



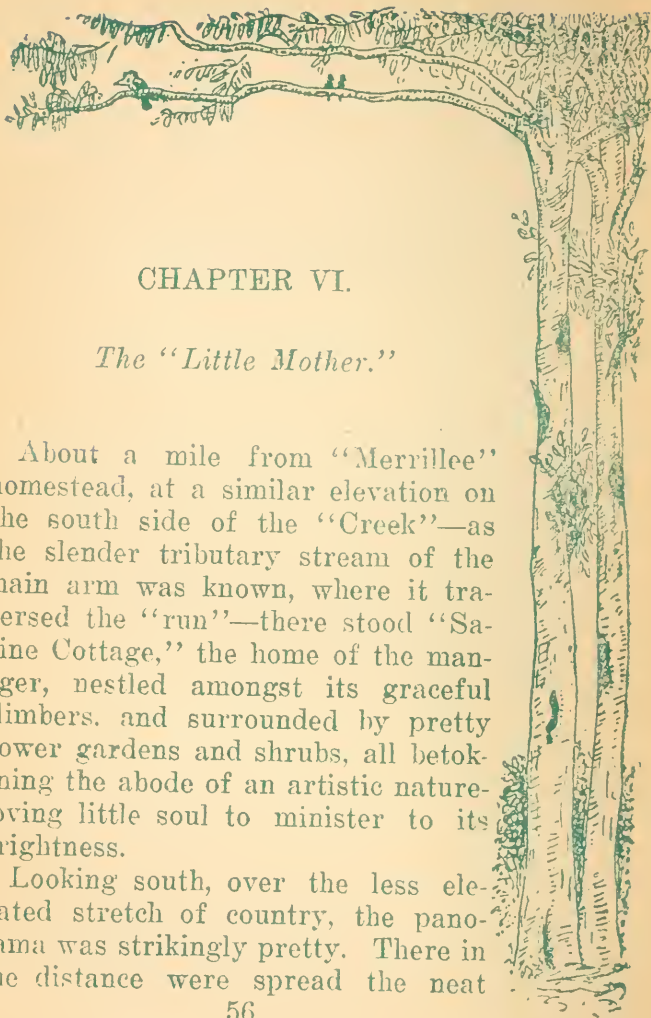
sult of the incident of the previous evening, for Sybil's refusal alone could have prompted the proposition just propounded by him.

"Jolly. Jolly! Old chap! Why, it would be old times again. If you mean it, shake," and the two men gripped firmly.

Returned from their walk, the breakfast gong soon clanged in the hall, and Geoff. noticed Ralph brace himself as for an ordeal.

But Sybil did not rise for breakfast, and, later, waved her adieux from her window as the two chums rode off.



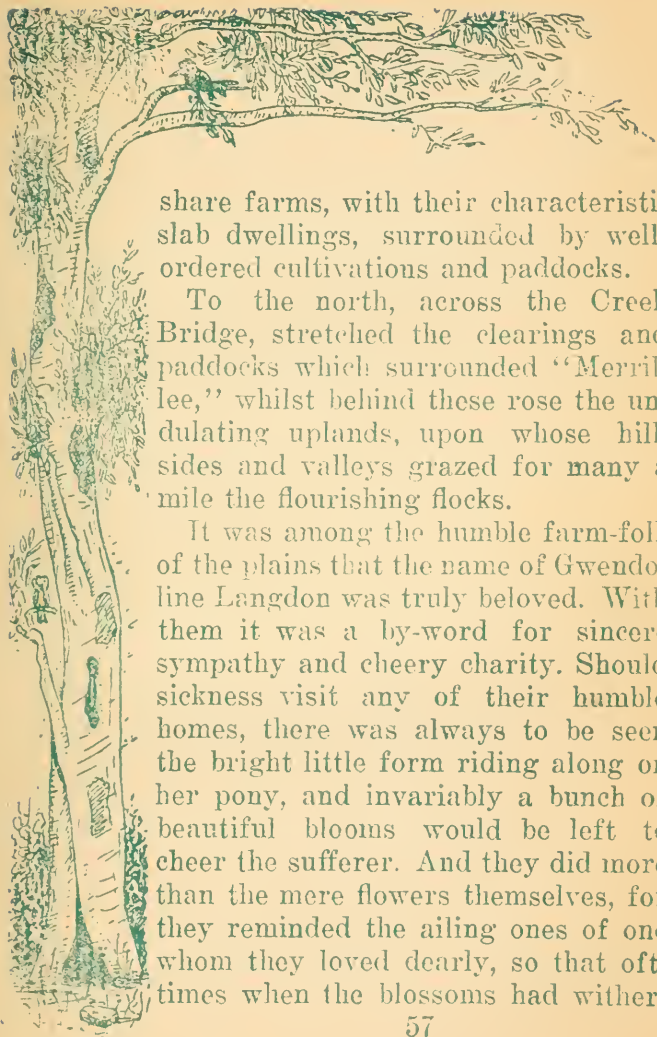


CHAPTER VI.

The "Little Mother."

About a mile from "Merrillee" homestead, at a similar elevation on the south side of the "Creek"—as the slender tributary stream of the main arm was known, where it traversed the "run"—there stood "Sabine Cottage," the home of the manager, nestled amongst its graceful climbers, and surrounded by pretty flower gardens and shrubs, all betokening the abode of an artistic nature-loving little soul to minister to its brightness.

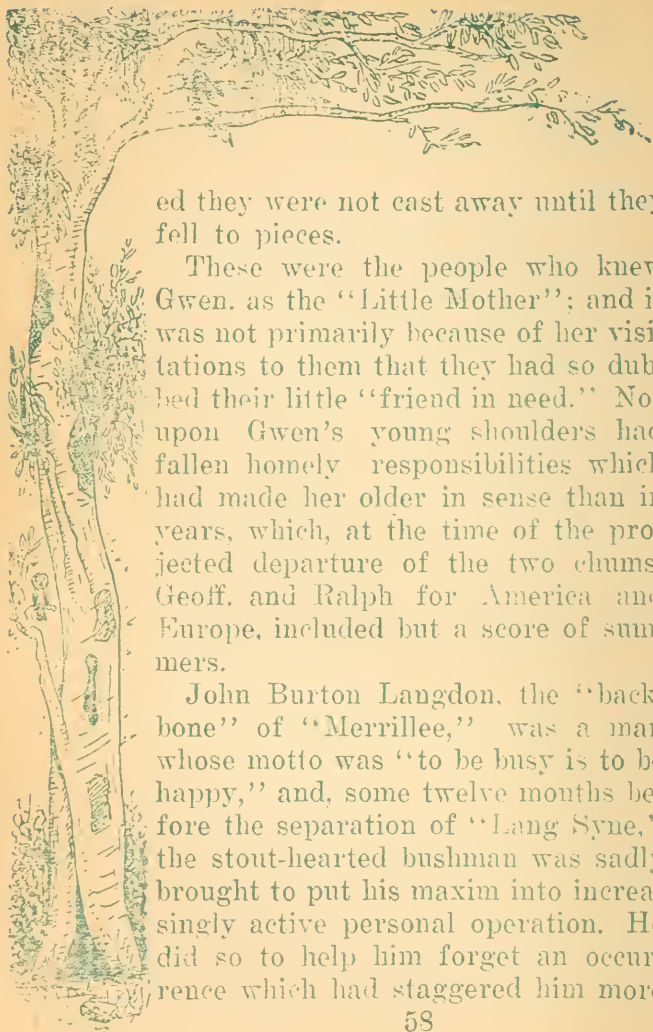
Looking south, over the less elevated stretch of country, the panorama was strikingly pretty. There in the distance were spread the neat



share farms, with their characteristic slab dwellings, surrounded by well-ordered cultivations and paddocks.

To the north, across the Creek Bridge, stretched the clearings and paddocks which surrounded "Merrilee," whilst behind these rose the undulating uplands, upon whose hill-sides and valleys grazed for many a mile the flourishing flocks.


It was among the humble farm-folk of the plains that the name of Gwendoline Langdon was truly beloved. With them it was a by-word for sincere sympathy and cheery charity. Should sickness visit any of their humble homes, there was always to be seen the bright little form riding along on her pony, and invariably a bunch of beautiful blooms would be left to cheer the sufferer. And they did more than the mere flowers themselves, for they reminded the ailing ones of one whom they loved dearly, so that oft-times when the blossoms had wither-



ed they were not cast away until they fell to pieces.

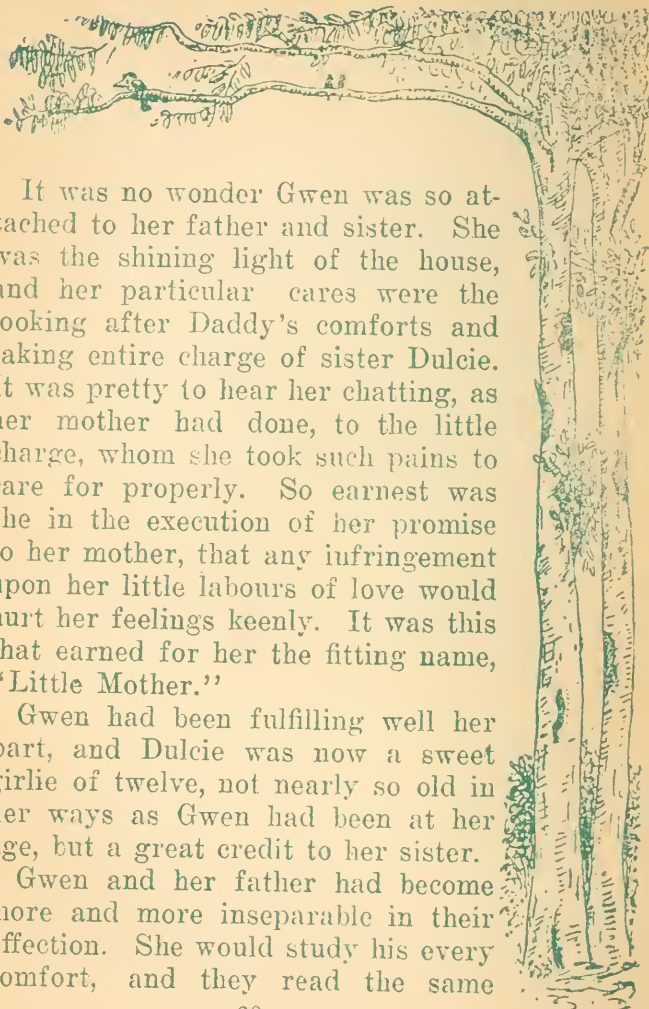
These were the people who knew Gwen. as the "Little Mother"; and it was not primarily because of her visitations to them that they had so dubbed their little "friend in need." No; upon Gwen's young shoulders had fallen homely responsibilities which had made her older in sense than in years, which, at the time of the projected departure of the two chums, Geoff. and Ralph for America and Europe, included but a score of summers.

John Burton Langdon, the "backbone" of "Merrilee," was a man whose motto was "to be busy is to be happy," and, some twelve months before the separation of "Lang Syne," the stout-hearted bushman was sadly brought to put his maxim into increasingly active personal operation. He did so to help him forget an occurrence which had staggered him more



than would all the hardships he had encountered in his eventful life, even had they come upon him at once. The bereavement of his loving companion in life, who had shared all these hardships and helped him through them, was a terrible blow, and the sad part of it was that the tiny two-year-old Dulcie, a little curly-headed toddler was left to the care of her "big sister" Gwen, then but nine years old.

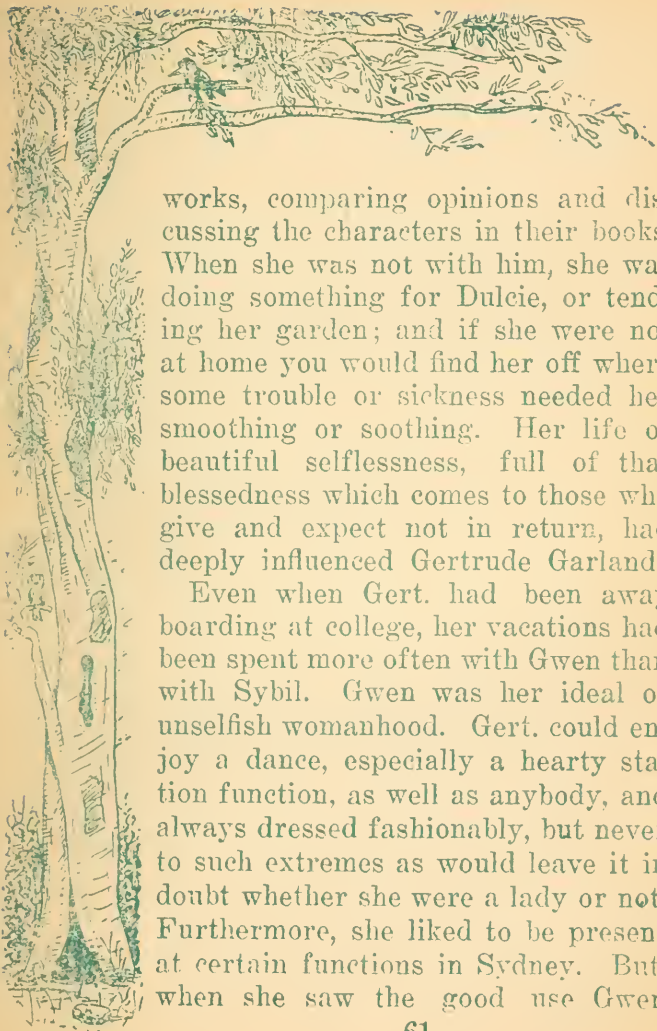
Just before the mother passed from the "little heaven" she had made at "Sabine" to that prepared for her Above, little Gwen, whose tender years did not realise the awfulness of what was about to happen, took her mother's hand and stroked her hair, saying simply in her tiny voice, "Don't worry, Mother dear. I'll look after Daddy and little Dulcie, and God will take care of you, till we come up to be with you again. Just like it says in that little hymn you taught me, mummy, eh?"



It was no wonder Gwen was so attached to her father and sister. She was the shining light of the house, and her particular cares were the looking after Daddy's comforts and taking entire charge of sister Dulcie. It was pretty to hear her chatting, as her mother had done, to the little charge, whom she took such pains to care for properly. So earnest was she in the execution of her promise to her mother, that any infringement upon her little labours of love would hurt her feelings keenly. It was this that earned for her the fitting name, "Little Mother."

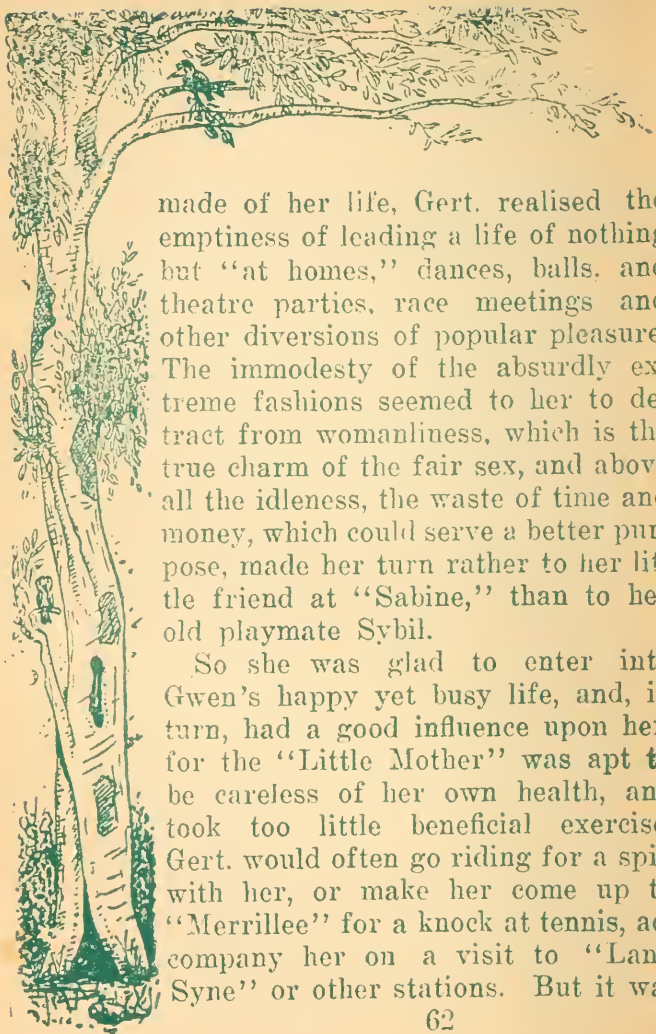
Gwen had been fulfilling well her part, and Dulcie was now a sweet girlie of twelve, not nearly so old in her ways as Gwen had been at her age, but a great credit to her sister.

Gwen and her father had become more and more inseparable in their affection. She would study his every comfort, and they read the same



works, comparing opinions and discussing the characters in their books. When she was not with him, she was doing something for Dulcie, or tending her garden; and if she were not at home you would find her off where some trouble or sickness needed her smoothing or soothing. Her life of beautiful selflessness, full of that blessedness which comes to those who give and expect not in return, had deeply influenced Gertrude Garland.

Even when Gert. had been away boarding at college, her vacations had been spent more often with Gwen than with Sybil. Gwen was her ideal of unselfish womanhood. Gert. could enjoy a dance, especially a hearty station function, as well as anybody, and always dressed fashionably, but never to such extremes as would leave it in doubt whether she were a lady or not. Furthermore, she liked to be present at certain functions in Sydney. But, when she saw the good use Gwen



made of her life, Gert. realised the emptiness of leading a life of nothing but "at homes," dances, balls, and theatre parties, race meetings and other diversions of popular pleasure. The immodesty of the absurdly extreme fashions seemed to her to detract from womanliness, which is the true charm of the fair sex, and above all the idleness, the waste of time and money, which could serve a better purpose, made her turn rather to her little friend at "Sabine," than to her old playmate Sybil.

So she was glad to enter into Gwen's happy yet busy life, and, in turn, had a good influence upon her, for the "Little Mother" was apt to be careless of her own health, and took too little beneficial exercise. Gert. would often go riding for a spin with her, or make her come up to "Merrillee" for a knock at tennis, accompany her on a visit to "Lang Syne" or other stations. But it was



rarely she could be induced to spend a night away from her father and Dulcie.

Mr. Langdon was always pleased to learn that Gert. had been about, and could generally notice it in Gwen's extra brightness, for he had always worried when he felt his good little daughter was over-doing her self-sacrifice.

One day when Gwen was about to set out on her pony for an afternoon with the farmer folk, Gert. rode up.

"Hullo! Gert. old girl" she called delightedly, "I'm just off 'on my rounds,' will you come with me? I'd put it off till to-morrow only poor old Tom Dent's wife has sciatica so badly, poor old soul, that I must try whether rubbing with castor oil and ammonia will give her any ease. Old Tom's hands are too rough to do it for her, poor old chap."

"You are a good little soul and no mistake! Of course, I'll come. Have-

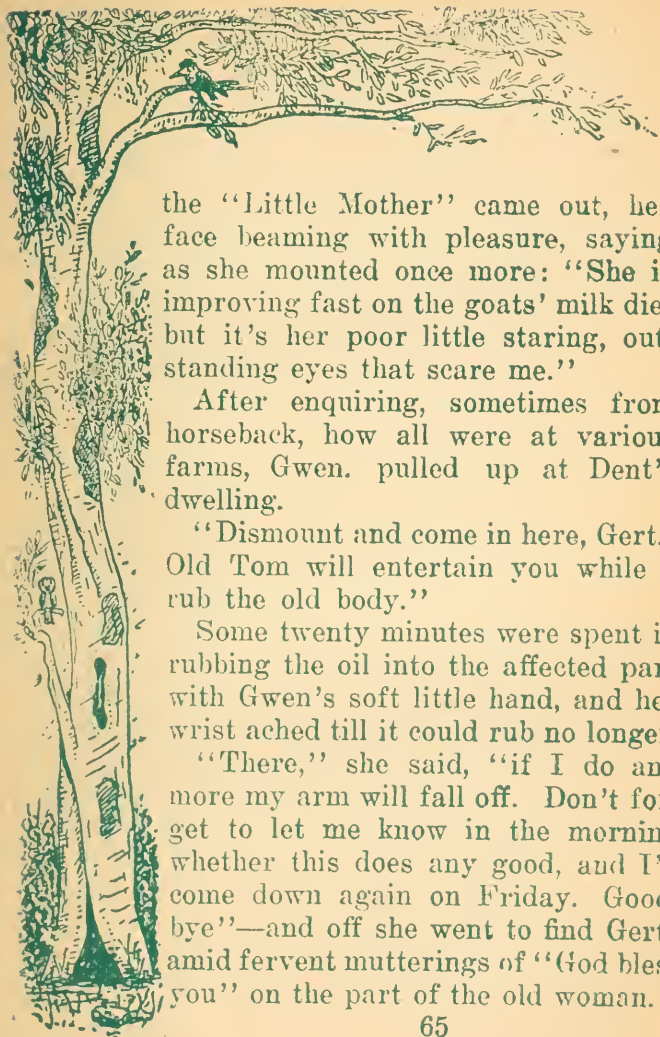


n't I longed to do so often, and do I ever stop at joining in anything you do, Gwennie?"

They were soon cantering along the serpentine road which led to the farms, Gwen. with her medicine-bag strapped to the saddle.

"I've to pop in here just to give Mrs. Schenck a piece of advice about her new baby. It's such a weakly little mite, I'm afraid she will lose it. I wrote about it to auntie Aline, who had the same trouble with her Bob when he was young, and look what a fine boy he is now for fourteen years of age. Auntie says she found rubbing olive oil into the wee babe's skin nourished it through the pores. It can't take cow's milk, but lives on goats'. I got Dad to get her a nanny a few weeks ago. Just hold "Dolly" for a moment. I shan't stay a minute for I'll just leave this bottle of oil and see how baby is."

It was not five minutes after that



the "Little Mother" came out, her face beaming with pleasure, saying as she mounted once more: "She is improving fast on the goats' milk diet but it's her poor little staring, out-standing eyes that scare me."

After enquiring, sometimes from horseback, how all were at various farms, Gwen. pulled up at Dent's dwelling.

"Dismount and come in here, Gert.; Old Tom will entertain you while I rub the old body."

Some twenty minutes were spent in rubbing the oil into the affected part with Gwen's soft little hand, and her wrist ached till it could rub no longer.

"There," she said, "if I do any more my arm will fall off. Don't forget to let me know in the morning whether this does any good, and I'll come down again on Friday. Good-bye"—and off she went to find Gert., amid fervent mutterings of "God bless you" on the part of the old woman.



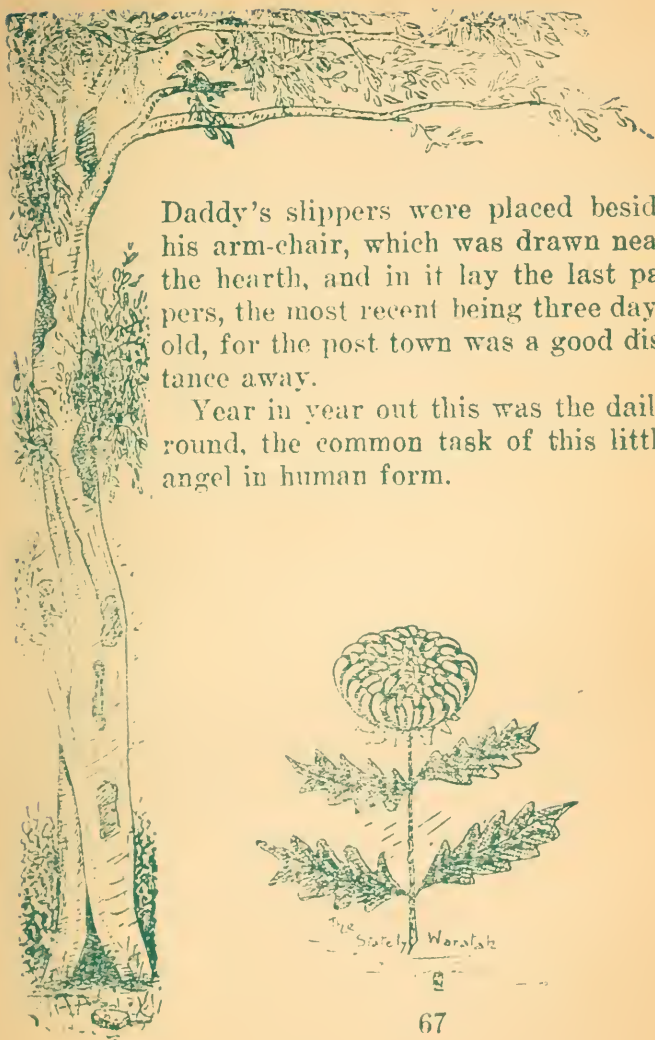
"Isn't he an interesting old man," said Gert.. "and so polite. He had me in wrapt attention at his tales of the station in former days."

"Well, off we are for home now. I am glad you came with me, Gert., though I suppose it was nicer for me than for you, as you had to wait for me so much."

"Not at all, Gwennie, you know me better than that" was the rejoinder.

When they arrived at "Sabine Cottage," it was after four o'clock, but Gwen soon had tea ready, and, after the refreshment, Gert. was about to take her leave, when Gwen. detained her while she plucked a small cluster of wall flower for Mr. Garland. It was his favourite bloom and Gwen. had grown it specially for him for some years.

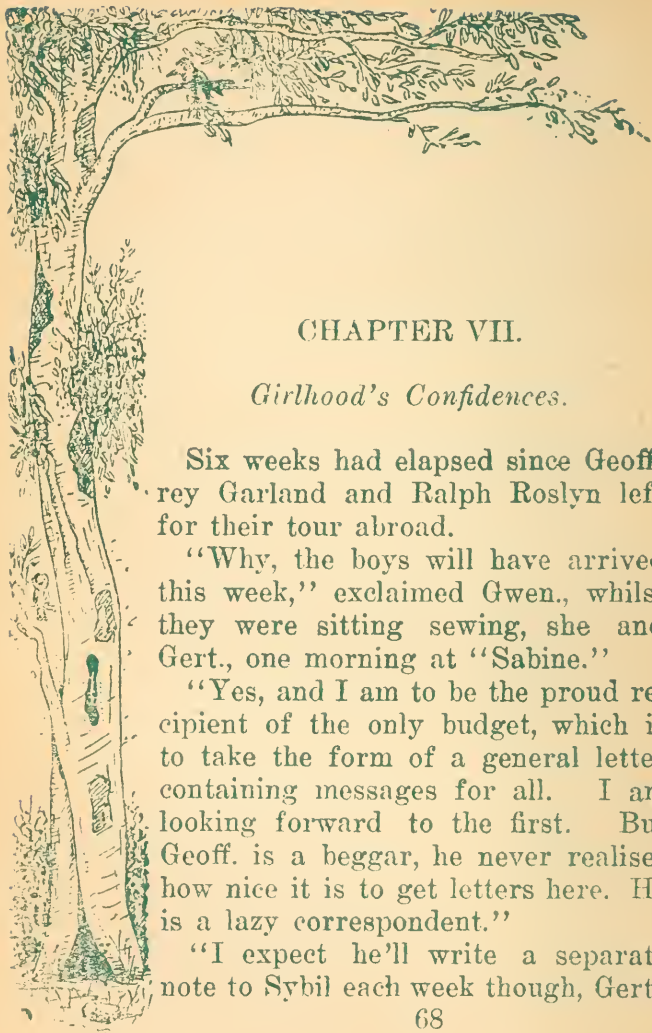
After waving Gert. out of sight, the good little soul saw that the fire was ready to light before father came in, and had a log brought to maintain it.



Daddy's slippers were placed beside his arm-chair, which was drawn near the hearth, and in it lay the last papers, the most recent being three days old, for the post town was a good distance away.

Year in year out this was the daily round, the common task of this little angel in human form.





CHAPTER VII.

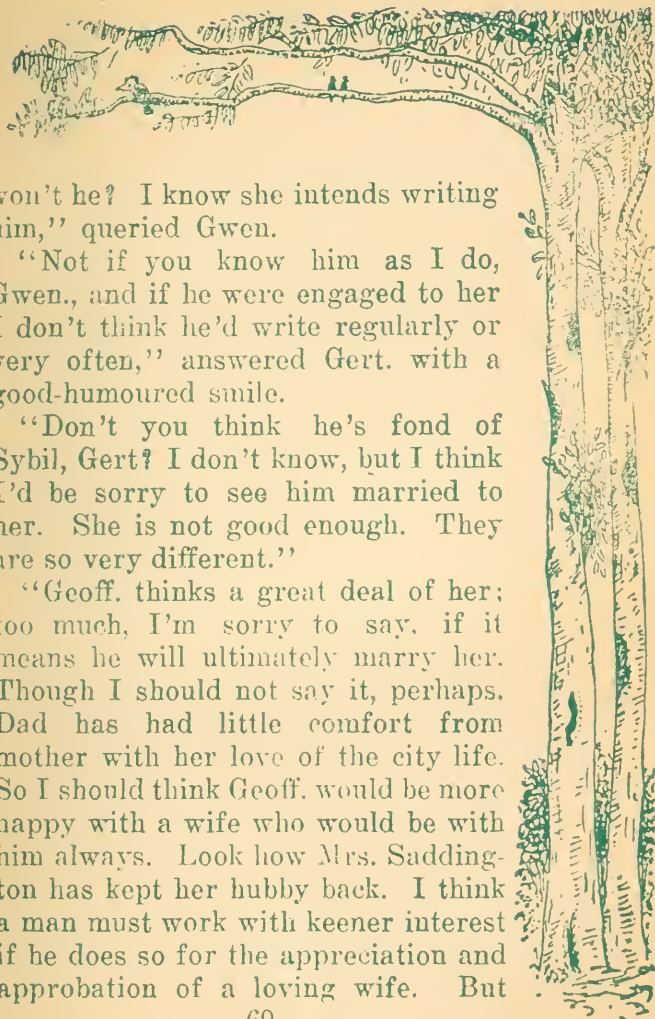
Girlhood's Confidences.

Six weeks had elapsed since Geoffrey Garland and Ralph Roslyn left for their tour abroad.

"Why, the boys will have arrived this week," exclaimed Gwen., whilst they were sitting sewing, she and Gert., one morning at "Sabine."

"Yes, and I am to be the proud recipient of the only budget, which is to take the form of a general letter containing messages for all. I am looking forward to the first. But Geoff. is a beggar, he never realises how nice it is to get letters here. He is a lazy correspondent."

"I expect he'll write a separate note to Sybil each week though, Gert.,




won't he? I know she intends writing him," queried Gwen.

"Not if you know him as I do, Gwen., and if he were engaged to her I don't think he'd write regularly or very often," answered Gert. with a good-humoured smile.

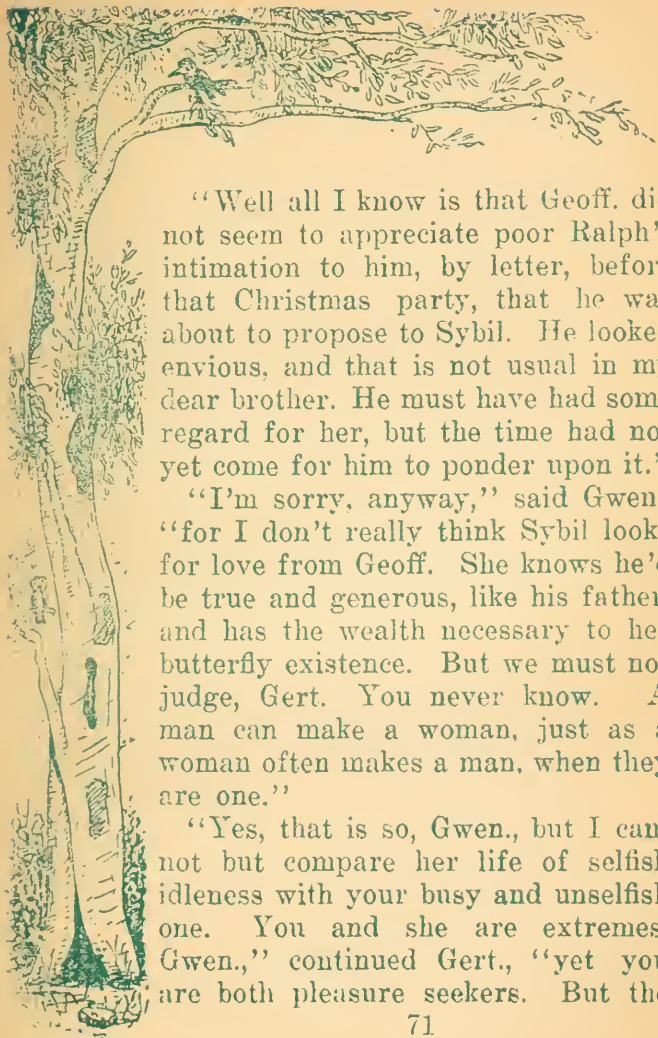
"Don't you think he's fond of Sybil, Gert? I don't know, but I think I'd be sorry to see him married to her. She is not good enough. They are so very different."

"Geoff. thinks a great deal of her; too much, I'm sorry to say, if it means he will ultimately marry her. Though I should not say it, perhaps. Dad has had little comfort from mother with her love of the city life. So I should think Geoff. would be more happy with a wife who would be with him always. Look how Mrs. Saddington has kept her hubby back. I think a man must work with keener interest if he does so for the appreciation and approbation of a loving wife. But



what I hate about the affair is that Mum so acquiesces in the match. Mrs. Saddington is very deep and has the mortgage in view, there's no doubt. But the idea would fit in with Mum's desire to see Geoff. in society, so there it is. Geoff. is a fine athletic old boy and his striking personality would make him a distinguished figure in high life, but, like you Gwen., he looks rather to the useful than the useless side of life."

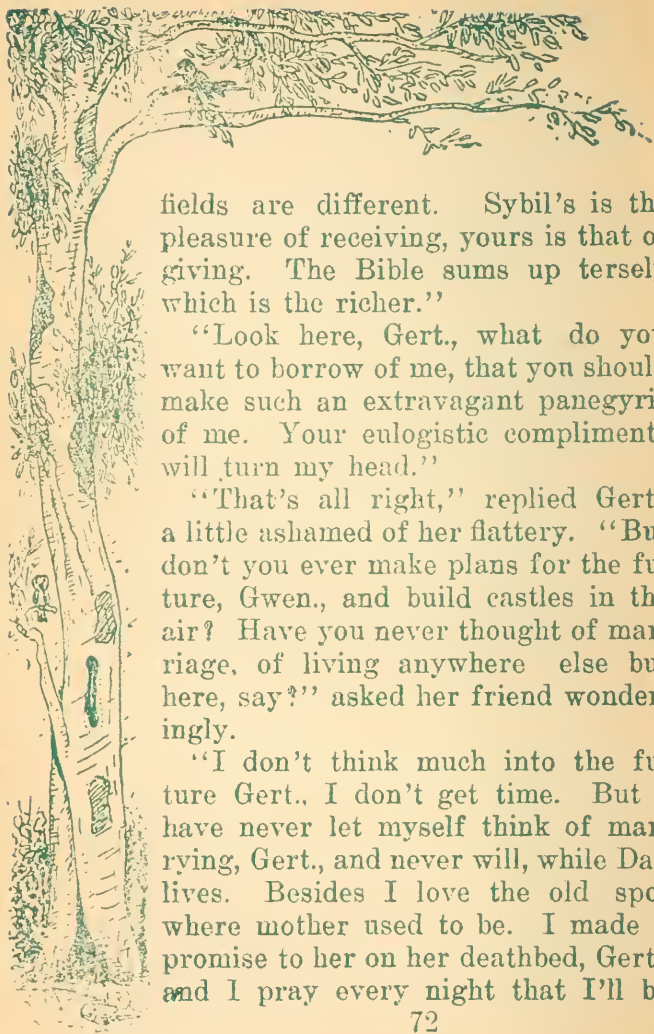
"You know, Gert.," observed Gwen. thoughtfully, "it has always seemed to me that Geoff's regard for Sybil has not been more marked than for any other young lady of his acquaintance. That is, as far as I have had an opportunity to judge. But ever since "little miss chatterbox" as her father used to call her, used to play making herself hostess and Geoff. host, Sybil has been most gushing in her manner toward Geoff., and I think it's largely her mother's doing, too."



"Well all I know is that Geoff. did not seem to appreciate poor Ralph's intimation to him, by letter, before that Christmas party, that he was about to propose to Sybil. He looked envious, and that is not usual in my dear brother. He must have had some regard for her, but the time had not yet come for him to ponder upon it."

"I'm sorry, anyway," said Gwen., "for I don't really think Sybil looks for love from Geoff. She knows he'd be true and generous, like his father, and has the wealth necessary to her butterfly existence. But we must not judge, Gert. You never know. A man can make a woman, just as a woman often makes a man, when they are one."

"Yes, that is so, Gwen., but I cannot but compare her life of selfish idleness with your busy and unselfish one. You and she are extremes, Gwen.," continued Gert., "yet you are both pleasure seekers. But the

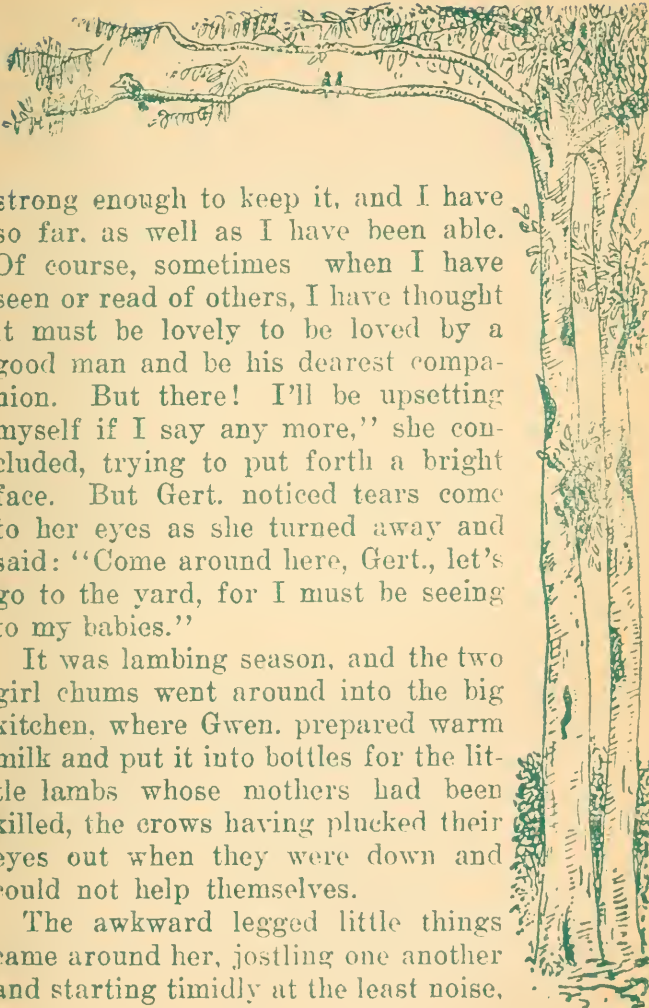


fields are different. Sybil's is the pleasure of receiving, yours is that of giving. The Bible sums up tersely which is the richer."

"Look here, Gert., what do you want to borrow of me, that you should make such an extravagant panegyric of me. Your eulogistic compliments will turn my head."

"That's all right," replied Gert., a little ashamed of her flattery. "But don't you ever make plans for the future, Gwen., and build castles in the air? Have you never thought of marriage, of living anywhere else but here, say?" asked her friend wonderingly.

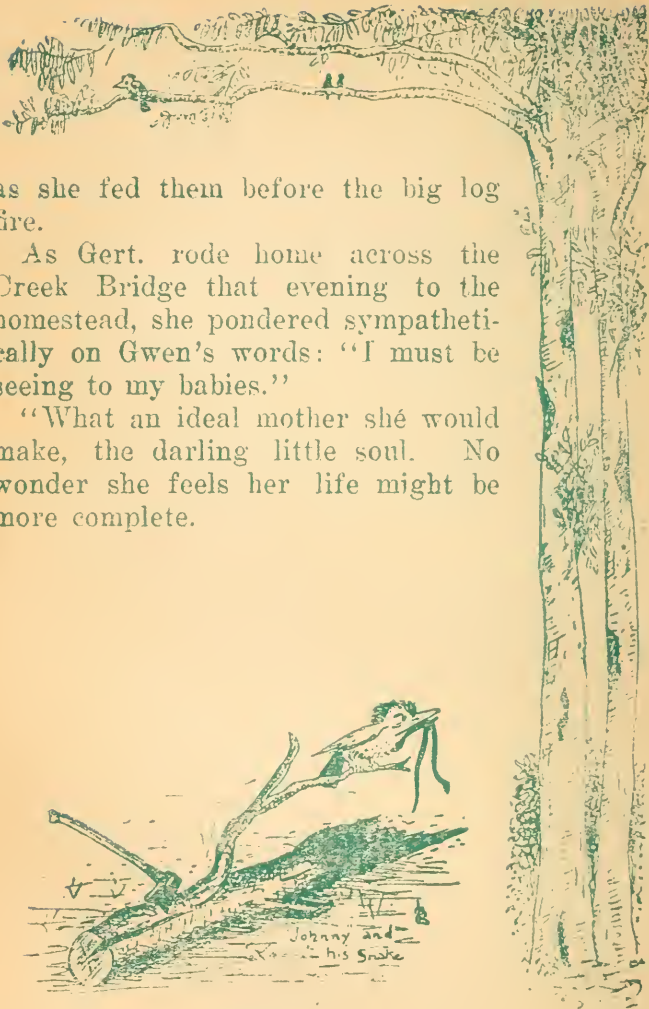
"I don't think much into the future Gert., I don't get time. But I have never let myself think of marrying, Gert., and never will, while Dad lives. Besides I love the old spot where mother used to be. I made a promise to her on her deathbed, Gert., and I pray every night that I'll be



strong enough to keep it, and I have so far, as well as I have been able. Of course, sometimes when I have seen or read of others, I have thought it must be lovely to be loved by a good man and be his dearest companion. But there! I'll be upsetting myself if I say any more," she concluded, trying to put forth a bright face. But Gert. noticed tears come to her eyes as she turned away and said: "Come around here, Gert., let's go to the yard, for I must be seeing to my babies."

It was lambing season, and the two girl chums went around into the big kitchen, where Gwen. prepared warm milk and put it into bottles for the little lambs whose mothers had been killed, the crows having plucked their eyes out when they were down and could not help themselves.

The awkward legged little things came around her, jostling one another and starting timidly at the least noise,

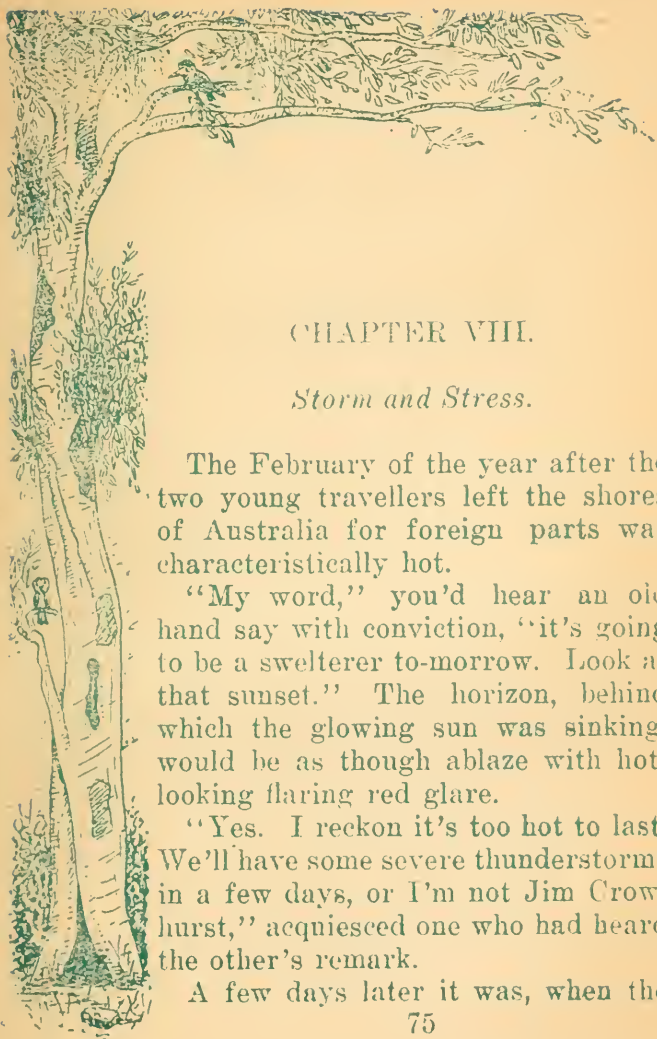


as she fed them before the big log fire.

As Gert. rode home across the Creek Bridge that evening to the homestead, she pondered sympathetically on Gwen's words: "I must be seeing to my babies."

"What an ideal mother she would make, the darling little soul. No wonder she feels her life might be more complete.





CHAPTER VIII.

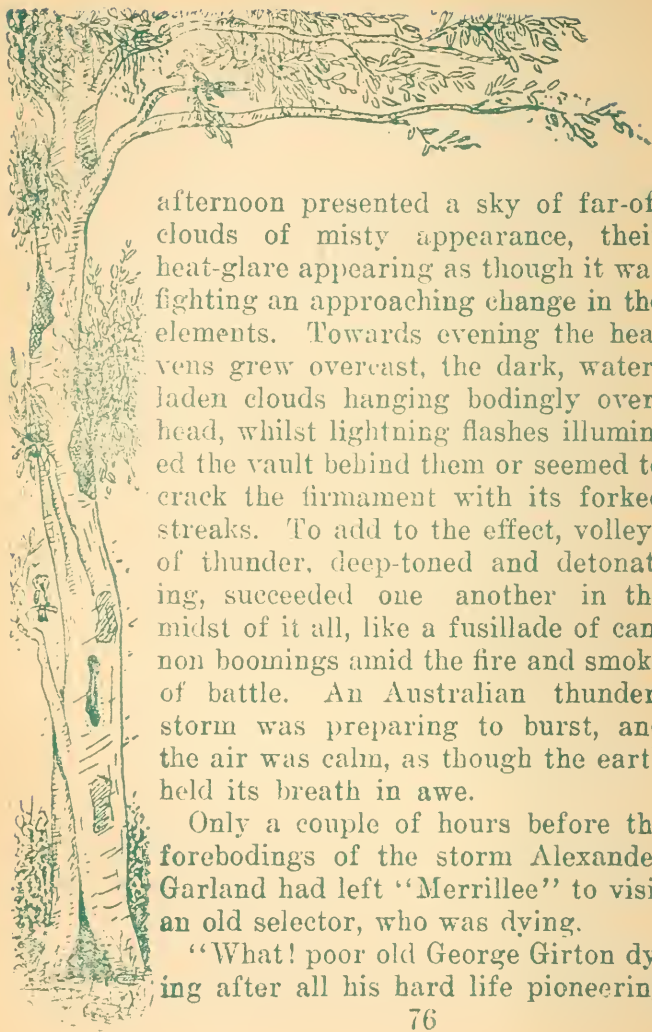
Storm and Stress.

The February of the year after the two young travellers left the shores of Australia for foreign parts was characteristically hot.

"My word," you'd hear an old hand say with conviction, "it's going to be a swelterer to-morrow. Look at that sunset." The horizon, behind which the glowing sun was sinking, would be as though ablaze with hot-looking flaring red glare.

"Yes. I reckon it's too hot to last. We'll have some severe thunderstorms in a few days, or I'm not Jim Crowhurst," acquiesced one who had heard the other's remark.

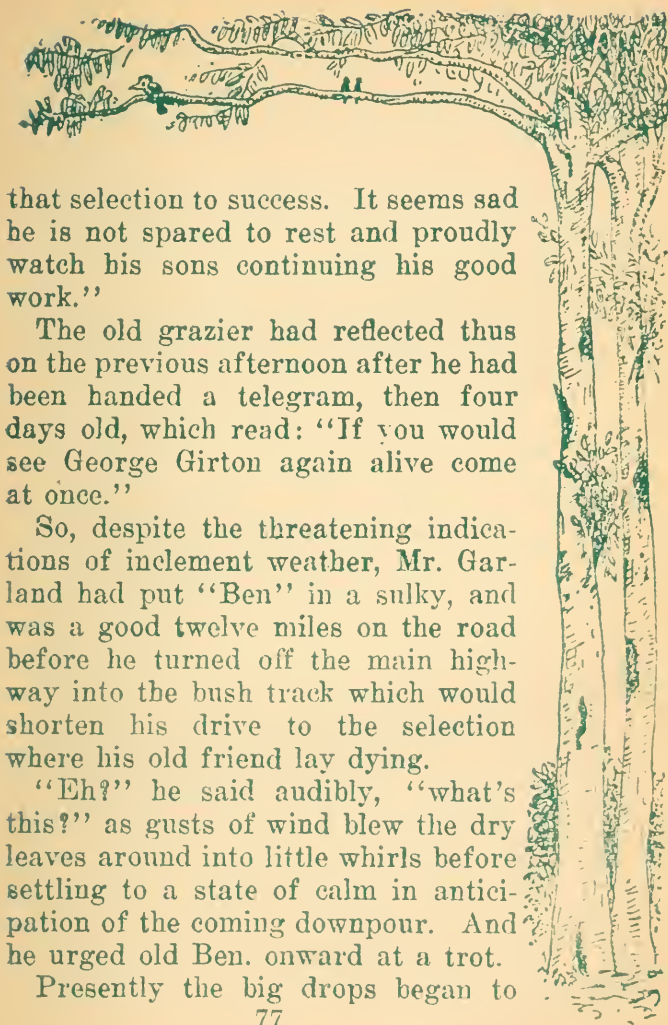
A few days later it was, when the



afternoon presented a sky of far-off clouds of misty appearance, their heat-glare appearing as though it was fighting an approaching change in the elements. Towards evening the heavens grew overcast, the dark, water-laden clouds hanging bodingly overhead, whilst lightning flashes illuminated the vault behind them or seemed to crack the firmament with its forked streaks. To add to the effect, volleys of thunder, deep-toned and detonating, succeeded one another in the midst of it all, like a fusillade of cannon boomings amid the fire and smoke of battle. An Australian thunderstorm was preparing to burst, and the air was calm, as though the earth held its breath in awe.

Only a couple of hours before the forebodings of the storm Alexander Garland had left "Merrillee" to visit an old selector, who was dying.

"What! poor old George Girton dying after all his hard life pioneering



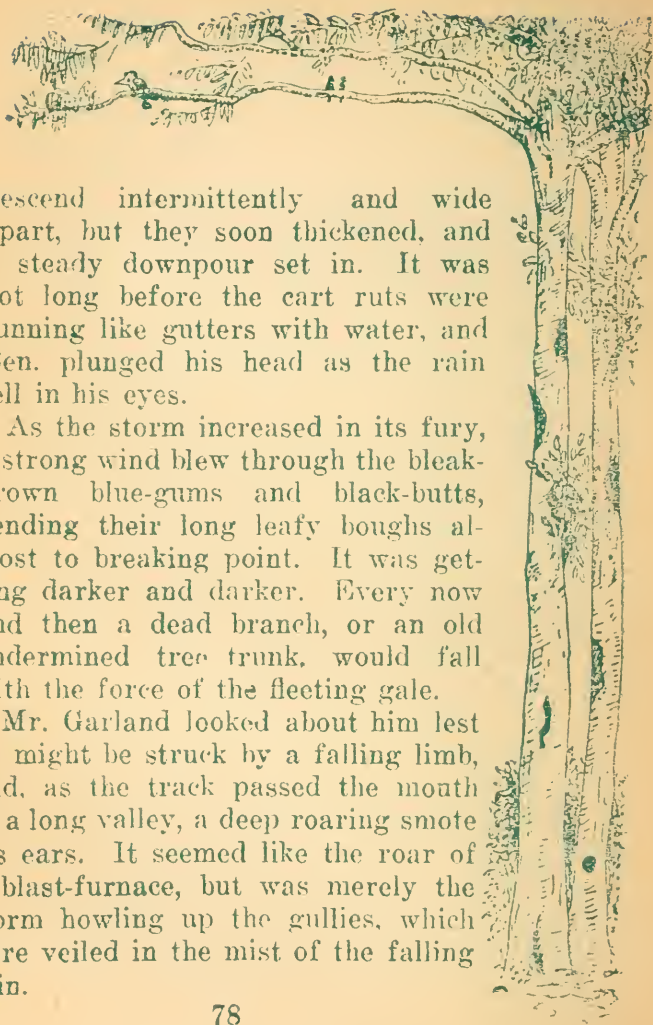
that selection to success. It seems sad he is not spared to rest and proudly watch his sons continuing his good work."

The old grazier had reflected thus on the previous afternoon after he had been handed a telegram, then four days old, which read: "If you would see George Girton again alive come at once."

So, despite the threatening indications of inclement weather, Mr. Garland had put "Ben" in a sulky, and was a good twelve miles on the road before he turned off the main highway into the bush track which would shorten his drive to the selection where his old friend lay dying.

"Eh?" he said audibly, "what's this?" as gusts of wind blew the dry leaves around into little whirls before settling to a state of calm in anticipation of the coming downpour. And he urged old Ben. onward at a trot.

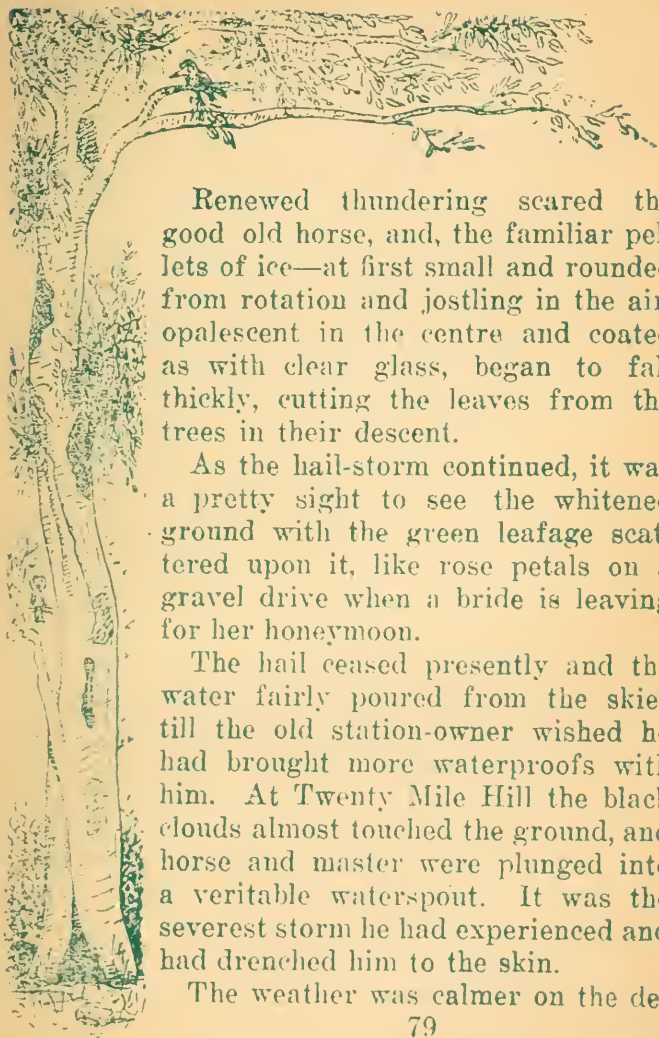
Presently the big drops began to



descend intermittently and wide apart, but they soon thickened, and a steady downpour set in. It was not long before the cart ruts were running like gutters with water, and Ben. plunged his head as the rain fell in his eyes.

As the storm increased in its fury, a strong wind blew through the bleak-grown blue-gums and black-butts, bending their long leafy boughs almost to breaking point. It was getting darker and darker. Every now and then a dead branch, or an old undermined tree trunk, would fall with the force of the fleeting gale.

Mr. Garland looked about him lest he might be struck by a falling limb, and, as the track passed the mouth of a long valley, a deep roaring smote his ears. It seemed like the roar of a blast-furnace, but was merely the storm howling up the gullies, which were veiled in the mist of the falling rain.



Renewed thundering scared the good old horse, and, the familiar pellets of ice—at first small and rounded from rotation and jostling in the air, opalescent in the centre and coated as with clear glass, began to fall thickly, cutting the leaves from the trees in their descent.

As the hail-storm continued, it was a pretty sight to see the whitened ground with the green leafage scattered upon it, like rose petals on a gravel drive when a bride is leaving for her honeymoon.

The hail ceased presently and the water fairly poured from the skies till the old station-owner wished he had brought more waterproofs with him. At Twenty Mile Hill the black clouds almost touched the ground, and horse and master were plunged into a veritable waterspout. It was the severest storm he had experienced and had drenched him to the skin.

The weather was calmer on the de-



scent to the selection, and, on arriving at the gates, young Joe Girton, a boy of twelve years came out and let the visitor in, taking his horse around to the stable.

"Dad died the day before yesterday, He said he know'd you'd come, but he couldn't last till you did," said the little fellow tearfully.

"Why you are wringing wet," he continued, "and look at the large hail-stones in the sulky. It must have been severe on the mountain."

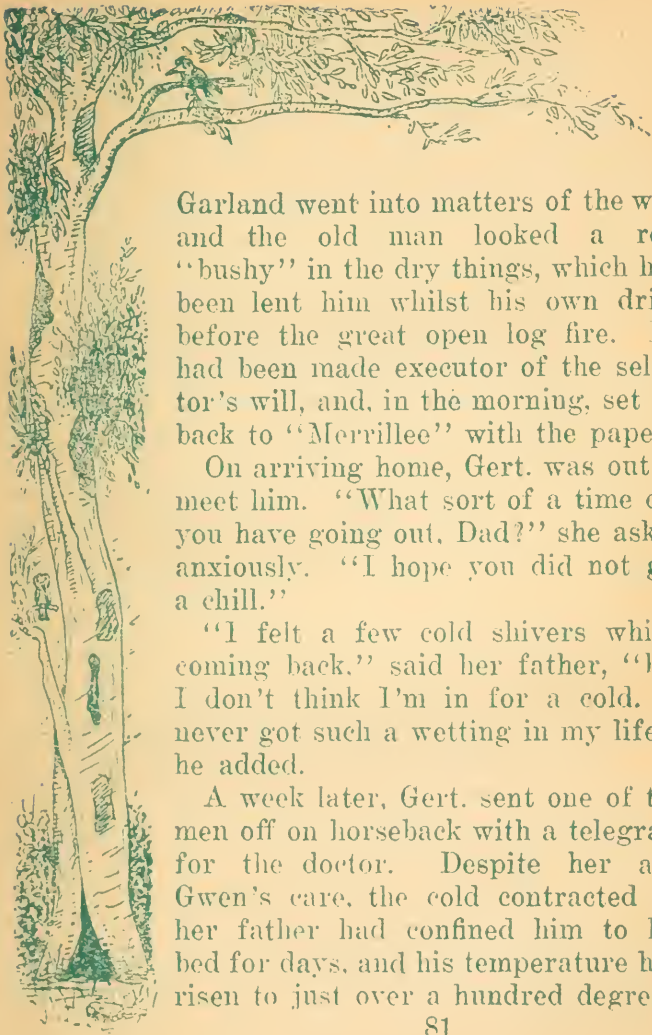
"It just was, Joe; but how is mother?" asked Mr. Garland.

"Oh, she's awful cut up and can't hardly speak," said the lad.

At the door the eldest two sons met their father's friend.

"My word! it is good of you to have come all this way in such weather," ventured the elder gratefully. "Don't say much to mum, Mr. Garland, she is simply broken.

That evening the "boys" and Mr.

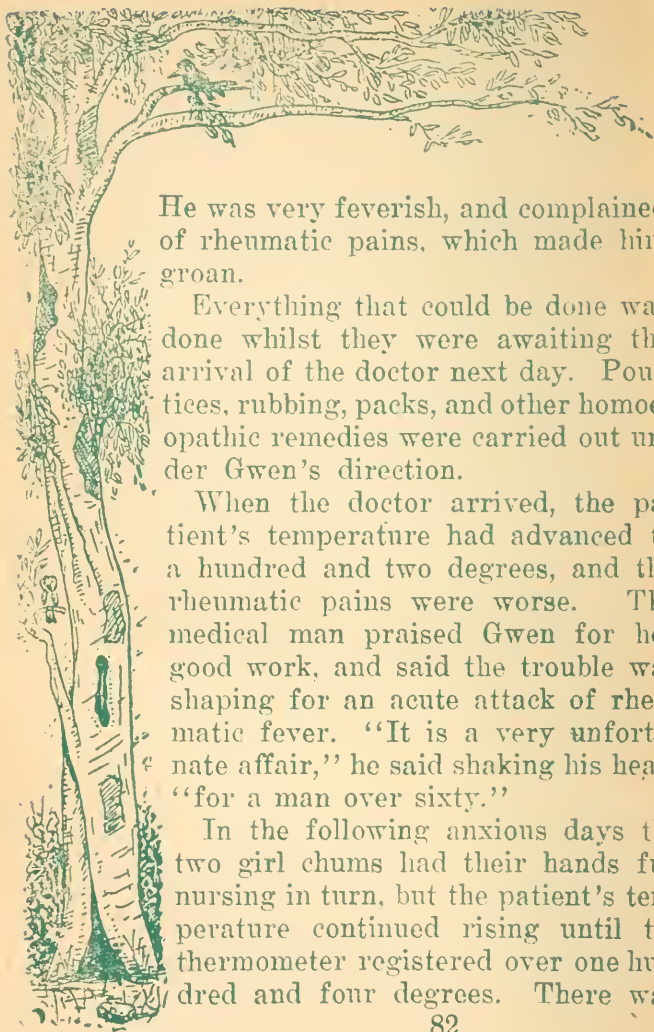


Garland went into matters of the will, and the old man looked a real "bushy" in the dry things, which had been lent him whilst his own dried before the great open log fire. He had been made executor of the selector's will, and, in the morning, set off back to "Merrillee" with the papers.

On arriving home, Gert. was out to meet him. "What sort of a time did you have going out, Dad?" she asked anxiously. "I hope you did not get a chill."

"I felt a few cold shivers whilst coming back," said her father, "but I don't think I'm in for a cold. I never got such a wetting in my life," he added.

A week later, Gert. sent one of the men off on horseback with a telegram for the doctor. Despite her and Gwen's care, the cold contracted by her father had confined him to his bed for days, and his temperature had risen to just over a hundred degrees.



He was very feverish, and complained of rheumatic pains, which made him groan.

Everything that could be done was done whilst they were awaiting the arrival of the doctor next day. Poul-tices, rubbing, packs, and other homoeopathic remedies were carried out under Gwen's direction.

When the doctor arrived, the patient's temperature had advanced to a hundred and two degrees, and the rheumatic pains were worse. The medical man praised Gwen for her good work, and said the trouble was shaping for an acute attack of rheumatic fever. "It is a very unfortunate affair," he said shaking his head, "for a man over sixty."

In the following anxious days the two girl chums had their hands full nursing in turn, but the patient's temperature continued rising until the thermometer registered over one hundred and four degrees. There was,

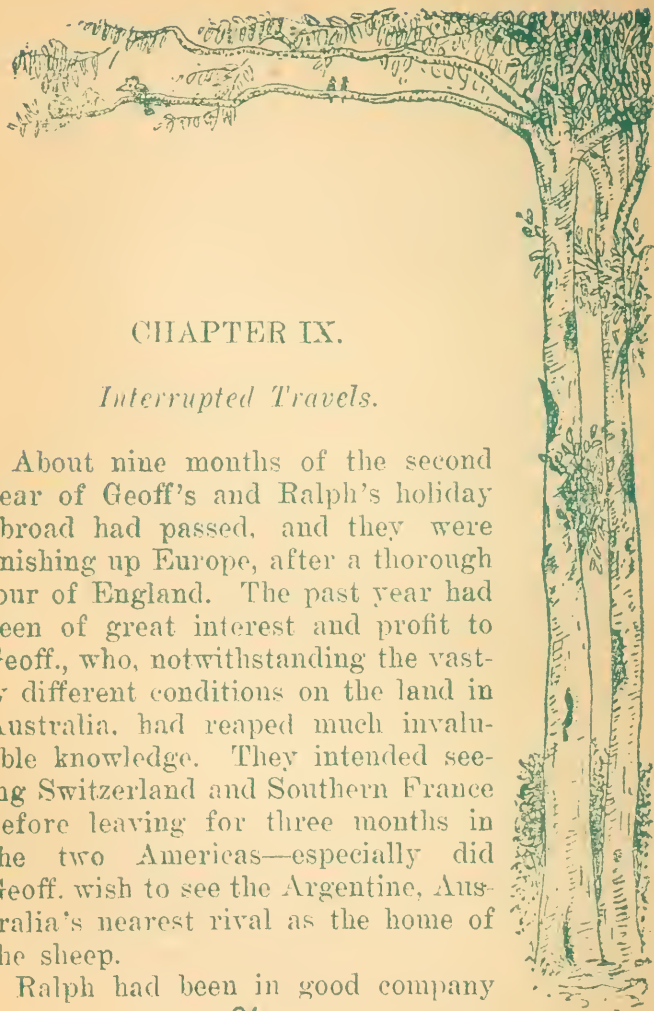


however, a rapid improvement when the reducing medicine and hot fomentations regulated temperature and pain alike.

Days lengthened into weeks, and the recovery was assured but slow. The doctor did not say anything on the subject to the girls nor to Mrs. Garland, who had come home when the case was found to be serious, but he was afraid of the old gentleman's heart, which had been in grave danger owing to the extent of the rheumatism reaching the muscles around the pericardium.

It was three months before the patient was about again, and the doctor impressed upon him the extreme care he must take of himself, his heart being left in a very weak state.

When lawyer Roslyn came up for a week's stay, during which time the Girton will matters were concluded, Mr. Garland added a codicil to his own will, in favour of his little nurse, Gwen. Langdon.

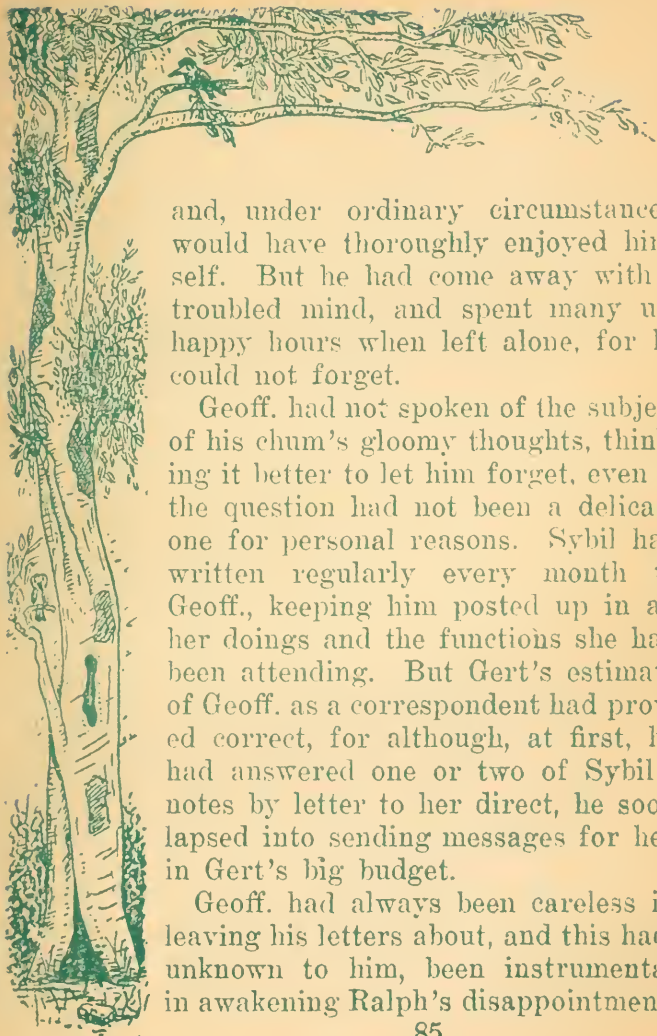


CHAPTER IX.

Interrupted Travels.

About nine months of the second year of Geoff's and Ralph's holiday abroad had passed, and they were finishing up Europe, after a thorough tour of England. The past year had been of great interest and profit to Geoff., who, notwithstanding the vastly different conditions on the land in Australia, had reaped much invaluable knowledge. They intended seeing Switzerland and Southern France before leaving for three months in the two Americas—especially did Geoff. wish to see the Argentine, Australia's nearest rival as the home of the sheep.

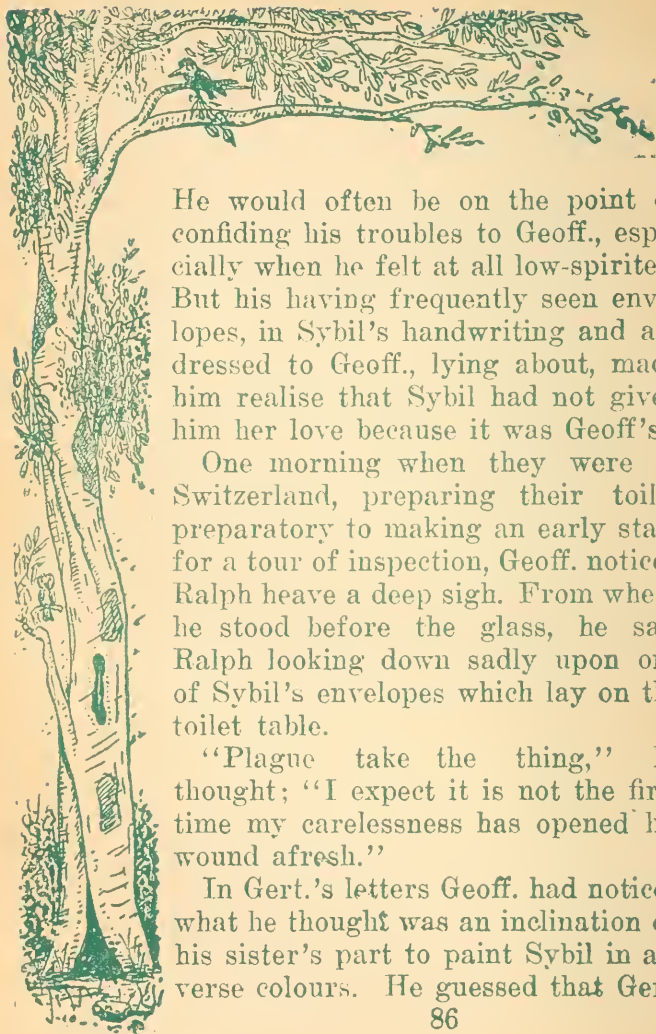
Ralph had been in good company



and, under ordinary circumstances, would have thoroughly enjoyed himself. But he had come away with a troubled mind, and spent many unhappy hours when left alone, for he could not forget.

Geoff. had not spoken of the subject of his chum's gloomy thoughts, thinking it better to let him forget, even if the question had not been a delicate one for personal reasons. Sybil had written regularly every month to Geoff., keeping him posted up in all her doings and the functions she had been attending. But Gert's estimate of Geoff. as a correspondent had proved correct, for although, at first, he had answered one or two of Sybil's notes by letter to her direct, he soon lapsed into sending messages for her in Gert's big budget.

Geoff. had always been careless in leaving his letters about, and this had, unknown to him, been instrumental in awakening Ralph's disappointment.

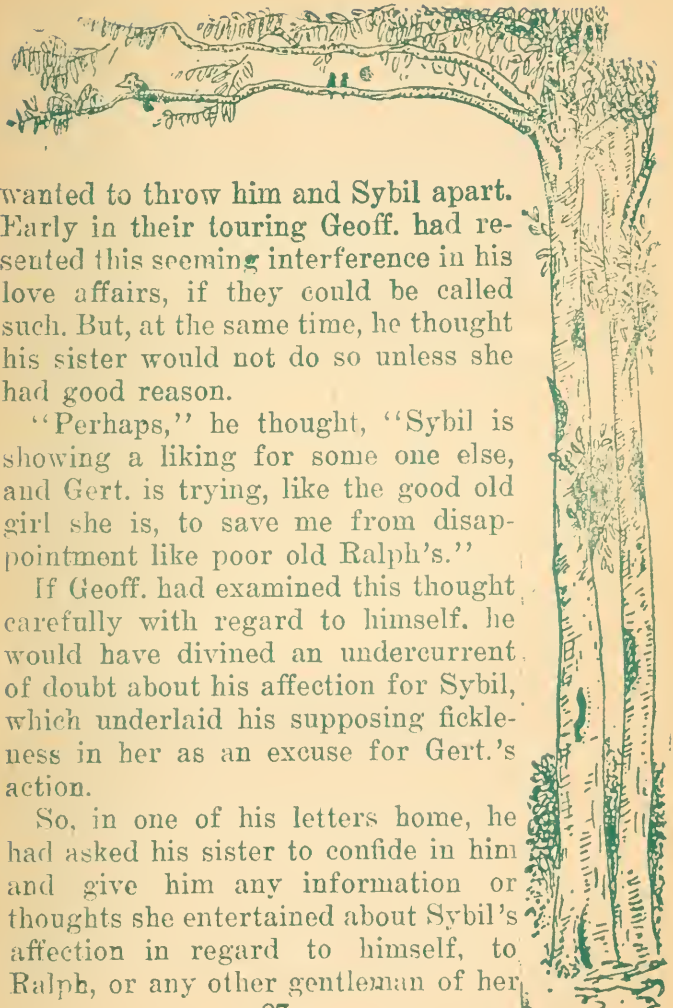


He would often be on the point of confiding his troubles to Geoff., especially when he felt at all low-spirited. But his having frequently seen envelopes, in Sybil's handwriting and addressed to Geoff., lying about, made him realise that Sybil had not given him her love because it was Geoff's.

One morning when they were in Switzerland, preparing their toilet preparatory to making an early start for a tour of inspection, Geoff. noticed Ralph heave a deep sigh. From where he stood before the glass, he saw Ralph looking down sadly upon one of Sybil's envelopes which lay on the toilet table.

"Plague take the thing," he thought; "I expect it is not the first time my carelessness has opened his wound afresh."

In Gert.'s letters Geoff. had noticed what he thought was an inclination on his sister's part to paint Sybil in adverse colours. He guessed that Gert.

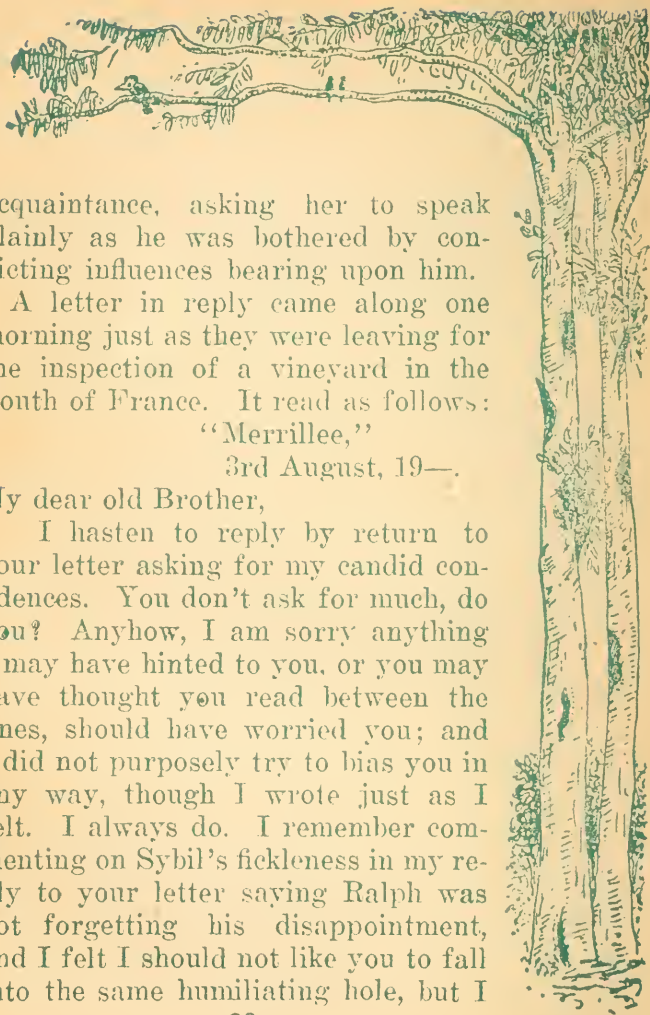


wanted to throw him and Sybil apart. Early in their touring Geoff. had resented this seeming interference in his love affairs, if they could be called such. But, at the same time, he thought his sister would not do so unless she had good reason.

"Perhaps," he thought, "Sybil is showing a liking for some one else, and Gert. is trying, like the good old girl she is, to save me from disappointment like poor old Ralph's."

If Geoff. had examined this thought carefully with regard to himself. he would have divined an undercurrent of doubt about his affection for Sybil, which underlaid his supposing fickleness in her as an excuse for Gert.'s action.

So, in one of his letters home, he had asked his sister to confide in him and give him any information or thoughts she entertained about Sybil's affection in regard to himself, to Ralph, or any other gentleman of her



acquaintance, asking her to speak plainly as he was bothered by conflicting influences bearing upon him.

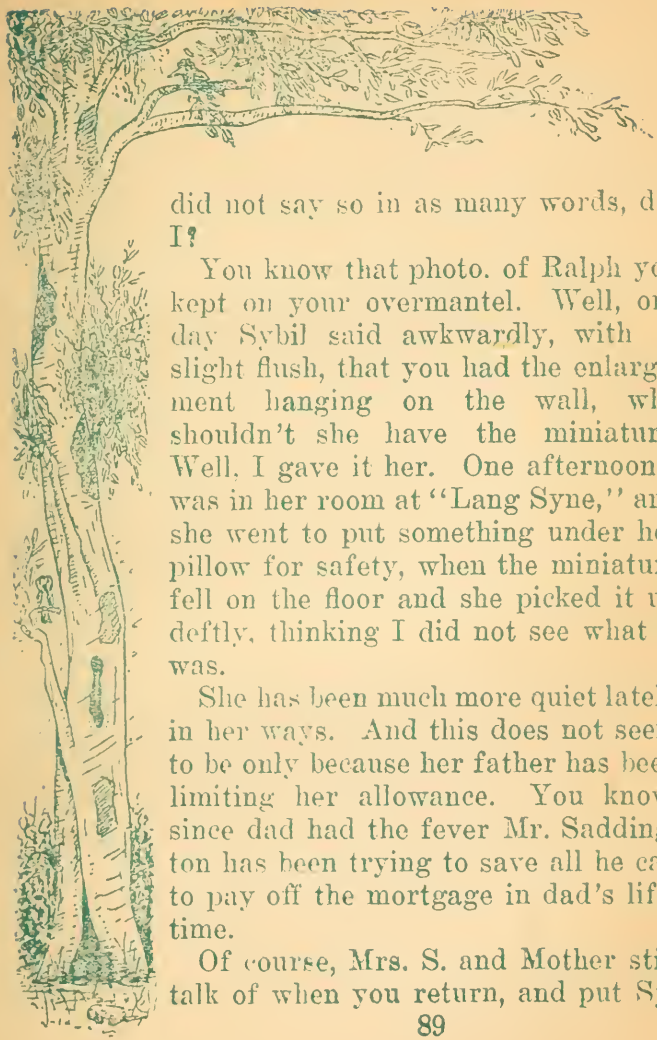
A letter in reply came along one morning just as they were leaving for the inspection of a vineyard in the South of France. It read as follows:

“Merrillee,”

3rd August, 19—.

My dear old Brother,

I hasten to reply by return to your letter asking for my candid confidences. You don't ask for much, do you? Anyhow, I am sorry anything I may have hinted to you, or you may have thought you read between the lines, should have worried you; and I did not purposely try to bias you in any way, though I wrote just as I felt. I always do. I remember commenting on Sybil's fickleness in my reply to your letter saying Ralph was not forgetting his disappointment, and I felt I should not like you to fall into the same humiliating hole, but I

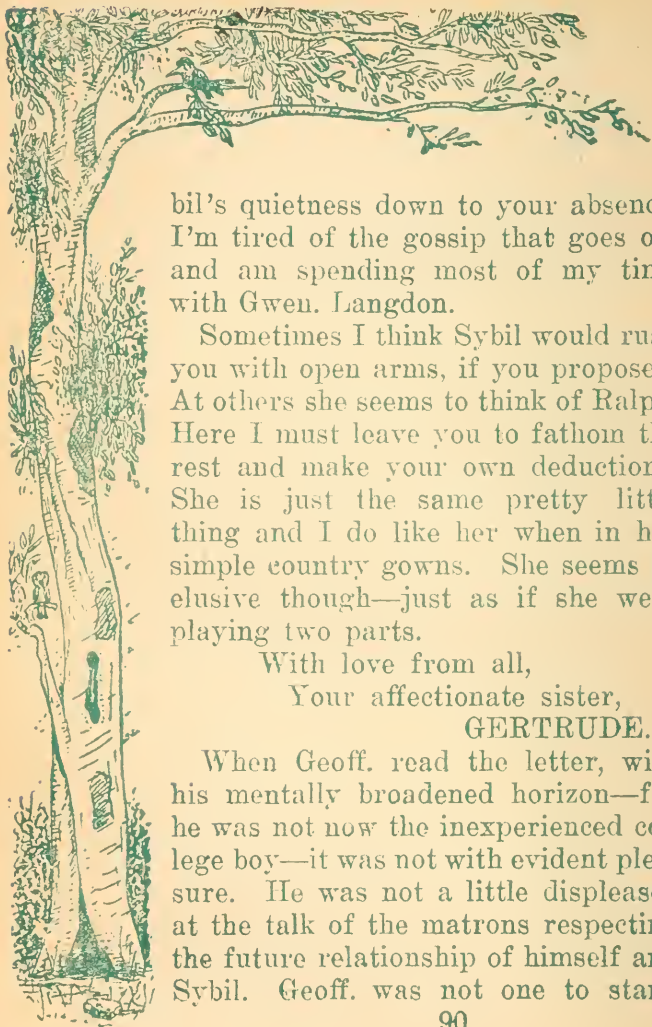


did not say so in as many words, did I?

You know that photo. of Ralph you kept on your overmantel. Well, one day Sybil said awkwardly, with a slight flush, that you had the enlargement hanging on the wall, why shouldn't she have the miniature. Well, I gave it her. One afternoon I was in her room at "Lang Syne," and she went to put something under her pillow for safety, when the miniature fell on the floor and she picked it up deftly, thinking I did not see what it was.

She has been much more quiet lately in her ways. And this does not seem to be only because her father has been limiting her allowance. You know, since dad had the fever Mr. Saddington has been trying to save all he can to pay off the mortgage in dad's lifetime.

Of course, Mrs. S. and Mother still talk of when you return, and put Sy-



bil's quietness down to your absence. I'm tired of the gossip that goes on, and am spending most of my time with Gwen. Langdon.

Sometimes I think Sybil would rush you with open arms, if you proposed. At others she seems to think of Ralph. Here I must leave you to fathom the rest and make your own deductions. She is just the same pretty little thing and I do like her when in her simple country gowns. She seems so elusive though—just as if she were playing two parts.

With love from all,

Your affectionate sister,

GERTRUDE.

When Geoff. read the letter, with his mentally broadened horizon—for he was not now the inexperienced college boy—it was not with evident pleasure. He was not a little displeased at the talk of the matrons respecting the future relationship of himself and Sybil. Geoff. was not one to stand



by while someone else chose a wife for him, and he resented the gossip.

"There's the mater and that mercenary Mrs. S. at it still! That a chap can't follow his own bent in a matter of love, without others fussing about doing it for him, is a pretty pass!" he complained. "As far as I can see, in this matter, poor Sybil is being pulled to pieces by two opposite forces—her own influence of true love and that of social position with its sham. I'll have to find out all about it myself. Mrs. S. dosen't think I'm rushing my chance, and hence wants to give me a pull, thinking that, if she rumours it about well, I will let her little butterfly get the golden-pollened flower she is trying to alight on," he continued sarcastically.

"But here! I am letting these gossips influence me. I am the one to act and I mean to come out honourably. It rests between Sybil and me."

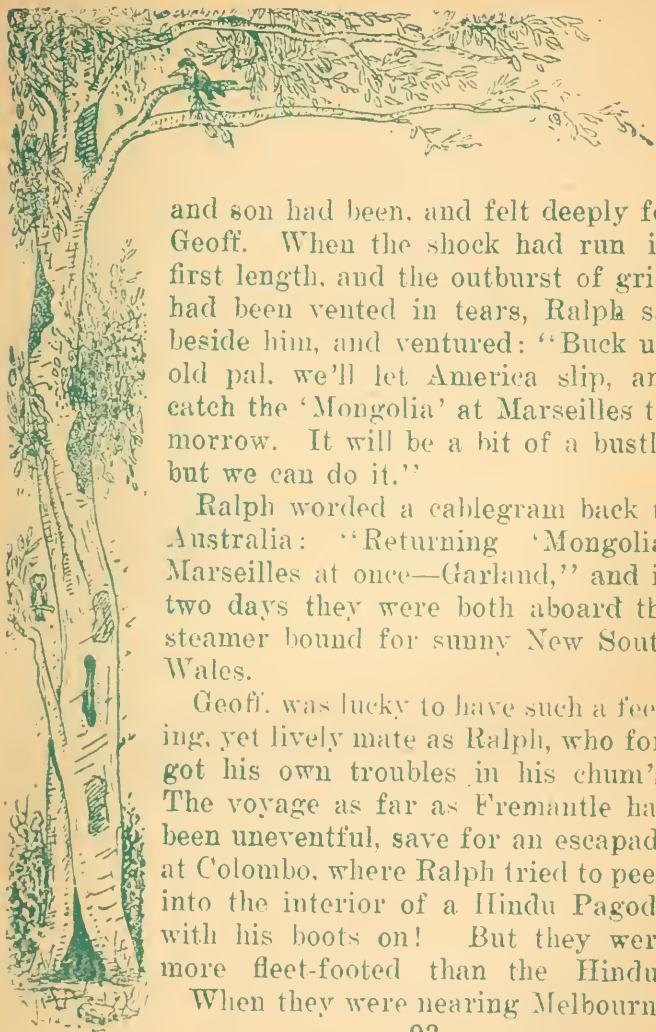


“Gert.’s a shrewd old girl! Don’t I just know how pretty Sybil looks as I knew her when we played together,” he soliloquised.

They had spent an enjoyable day, and had come downstairs, after refreshing themselves, to sit in the cool September breeze as it blew into the verandah. Presently, a post boy brought Geoff. a cablegram.

“Hullo! what’s this, Ralph? Surely not a message calling us home before we see America!” he called out to his companion, tearing open the envelope excitedly. But, alas! his features changed as he read the message, and he sat down, buried his face in his hands, and sobbed bitterly.

Ralph stepped quickly to his side, picking up the message, which had fallen from his grasp. It read: “Father died Wednesday heart failure.” Ralph was in an awkward position, not knowing how best to comfort his mate. He understood how attached father

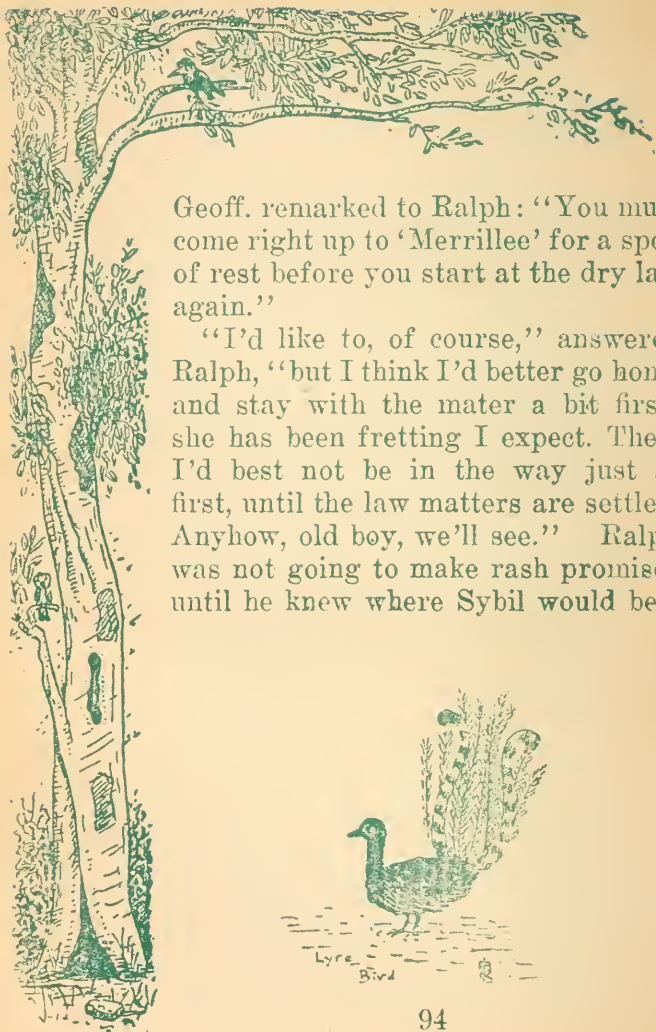


and son had been, and felt deeply for Geoff. When the shock had run its first length, and the outburst of grief had been vented in tears, Ralph sat beside him, and ventured: "Buck up, old pal, we'll let America slip, and catch the 'Mongolia' at Marseilles to-morrow. It will be a bit of a bustle, but we can do it."

Ralph worded a cablegram back to Australia: "Returning 'Mongolia' Marseilles at once—Garland," and in two days they were both aboard the steamer bound for sunny New South Wales.

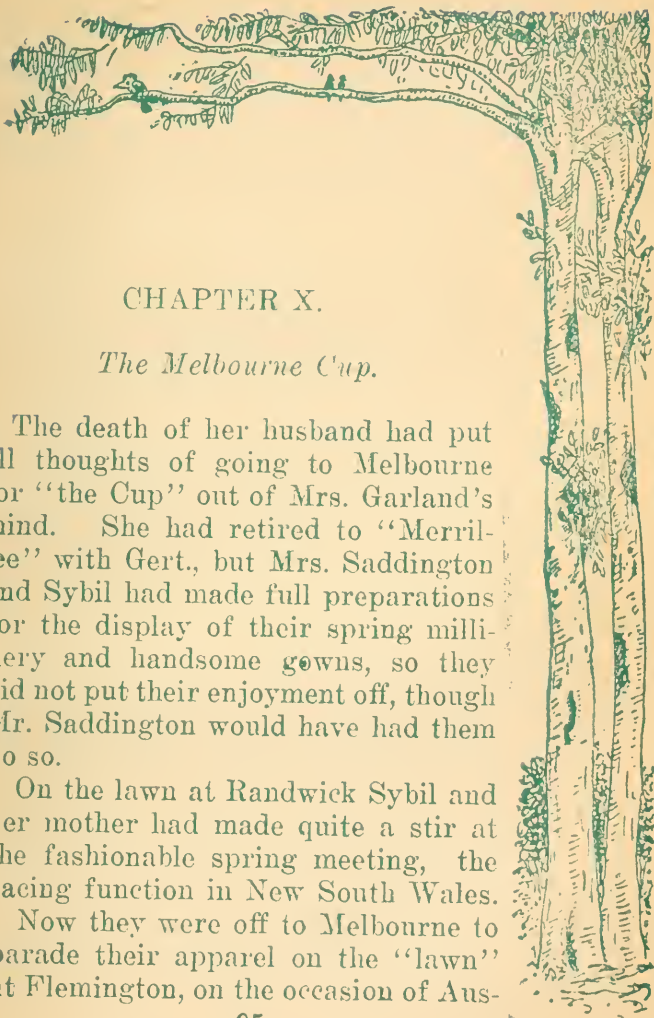
Geoff. was lucky to have such a feeling, yet lively mate as Ralph, who forgot his own troubles in his chum's. The voyage as far as Fremantle had been uneventful, save for an escapade at Colombo, where Ralph tried to peep into the interior of a Hindu Pagoda with his boots on! But they were more fleet-footed than the Hindus

When they were nearing Melbourne



Geoff. remarked to Ralph: "You must come right up to 'Merrillee' for a spell of rest before you start at the dry law again."

"I'd like to, of course," answered Ralph, "but I think I'd better go home and stay with the mater a bit first; she has been fretting I expect. Then, I'd best not be in the way just at first, until the law matters are settled. Anyhow, old boy, we'll see." Ralph was not going to make rash promises until he knew where Sybil would be.



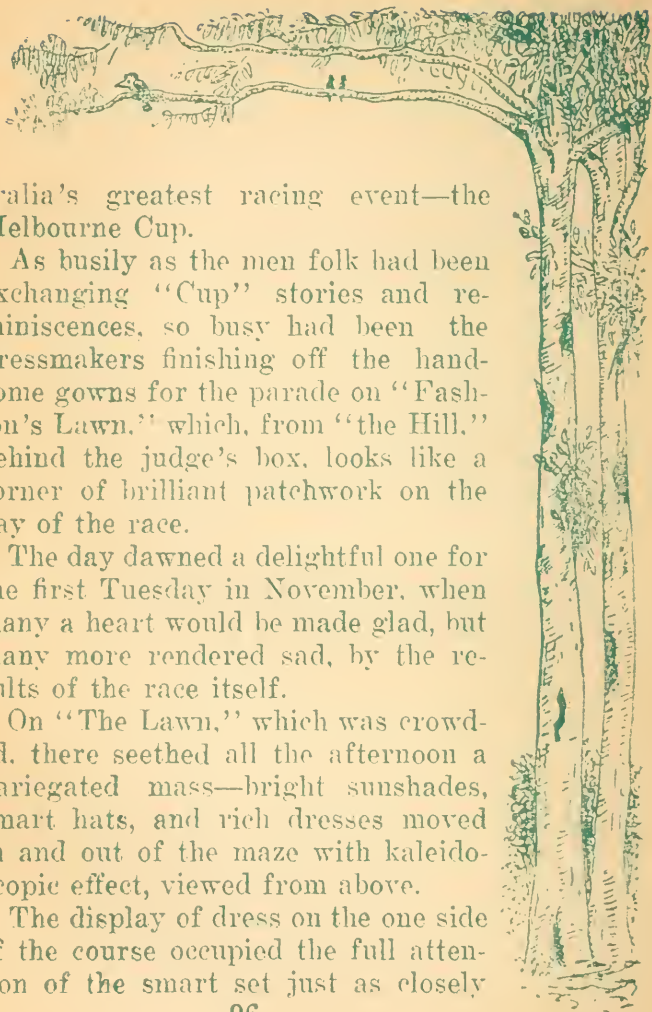
CHAPTER X.

The Melbourne Cup.

The death of her husband had put all thoughts of going to Melbourne for "the Cup" out of Mrs. Garland's mind. She had retired to "Merrilee" with Gert., but Mrs. Saddington and Sybil had made full preparations for the display of their spring millinery and handsome gowns, so they did not put their enjoyment off, though Mr. Saddington would have had them do so.

On the lawn at Randwick Sybil and her mother had made quite a stir at the fashionable spring meeting, the racing function in New South Wales.

Now they were off to Melbourne to parade their apparel on the "lawn" at Flemington, on the occasion of Aus-



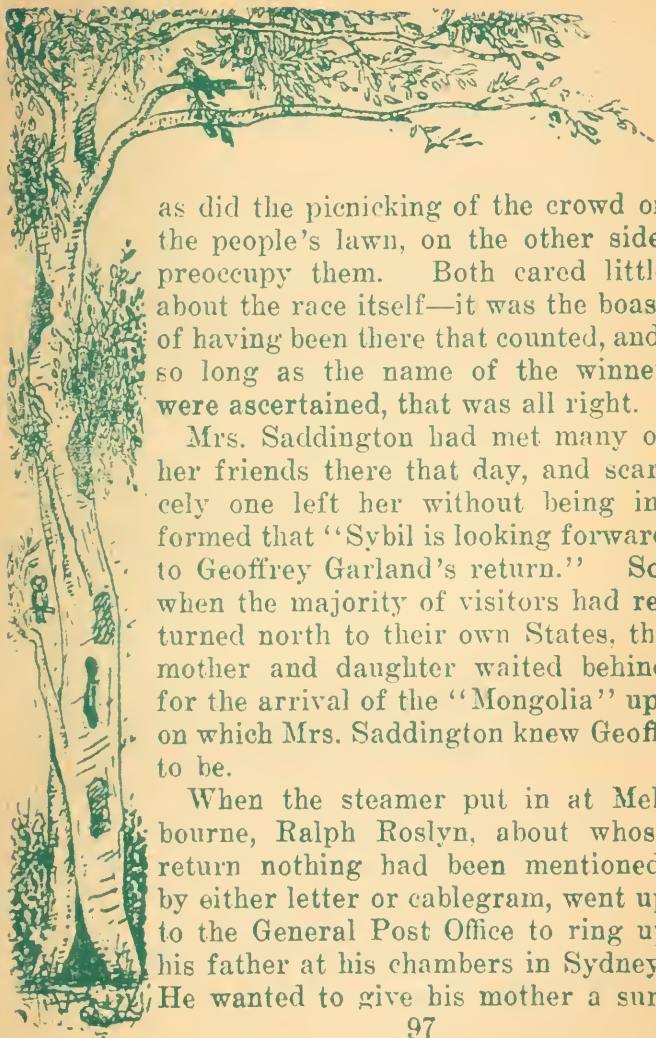
tralia's greatest racing event—the Melbourne Cup.

As busily as the men folk had been exchanging "Cup" stories and reminiscences, so busy had been the dressmakers finishing off the handsome gowns for the parade on "Fashion's Lawn," which, from "the Hill," behind the judge's box, looks like a corner of brilliant patchwork on the day of the race.

The day dawned a delightful one for the first Tuesday in November, when many a heart would be made glad, but many more rendered sad, by the results of the race itself.

On "The Lawn," which was crowded, there seethed all the afternoon a variegated mass—bright sunshades, smart hats, and rich dresses moved in and out of the maze with kaleidoscopic effect, viewed from above.

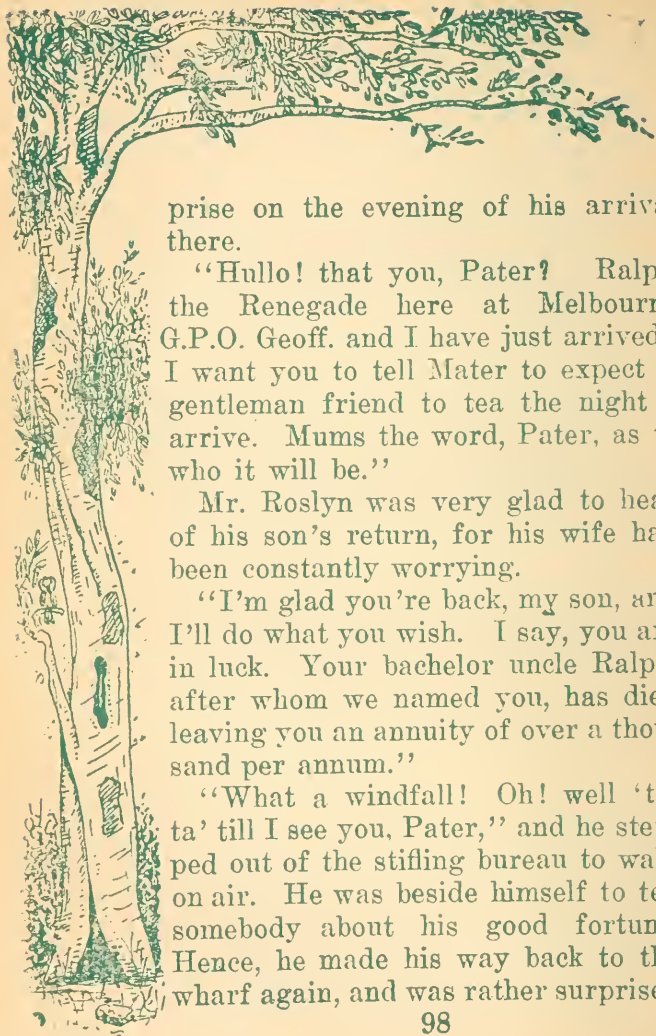
The display of dress on the one side of the course occupied the full attention of the smart set just as closely



as did the picnicking of the crowd on the people's lawn, on the other side, preoccupy them. Both cared little about the race itself—it was the boast of having been there that counted, and, so long as the name of the winner were ascertained, that was all right.

Mrs. Saddington had met many of her friends there that day, and scarcely one left her without being informed that "Sybil is looking forward to Geoffrey Garland's return." So, when the majority of visitors had returned north to their own States, the mother and daughter waited behind for the arrival of the "Mongolia" upon which Mrs. Saddington knew Geoff. to be.

When the steamer put in at Melbourne, Ralph Roslyn, about whose return nothing had been mentioned, by either letter or cablegram, went up to the General Post Office to ring up his father at his chambers in Sydney. He wanted to give his mother a sur-



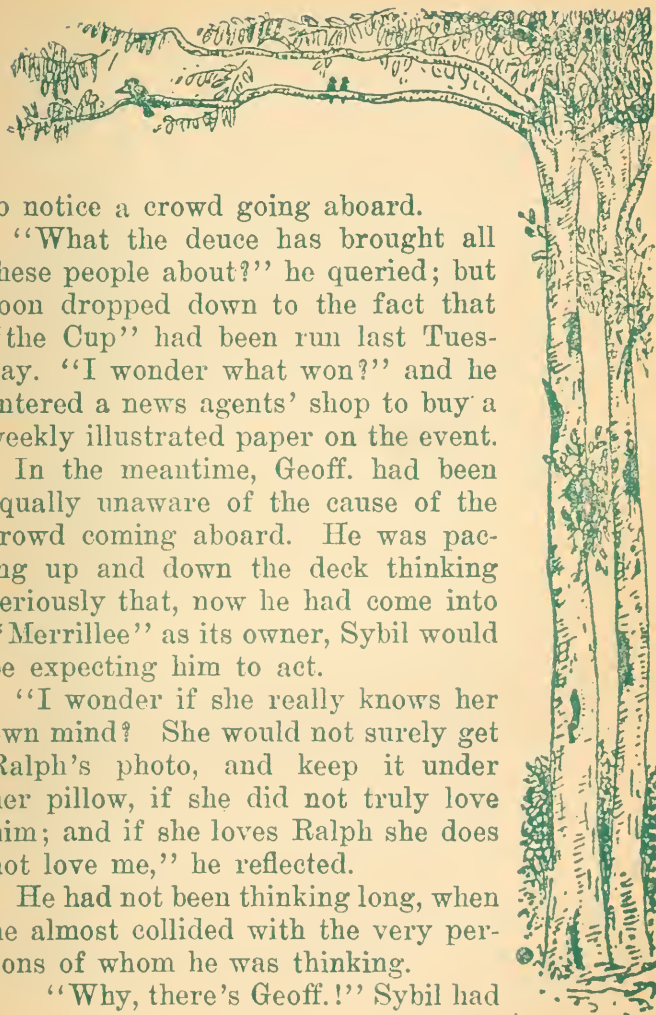
prise on the evening of his arrival there.

"Hullo! that you, Pater? Ralph the Renegade here at Melbourne G.P.O. Geoff. and I have just arrived. I want you to tell Mater to expect a gentleman friend to tea the night I arrive. Mums the word, Pater, as to who it will be."

Mr. Roslyn was very glad to hear of his son's return, for his wife had been constantly worrying.

"I'm glad you're back, my son, and I'll do what you wish. I say, you are in luck. Your bachelor uncle Ralph, after whom we named you, has died leaving you an annuity of over a thousand per annum."

"What a windfall! Oh! well 'tata' till I see you, Pater," and he stepped out of the stifling bureau to walk on air. He was beside himself to tell somebody about his good fortune. Hence, he made his way back to the wharf again, and was rather surprised



to notice a crowd going aboard.

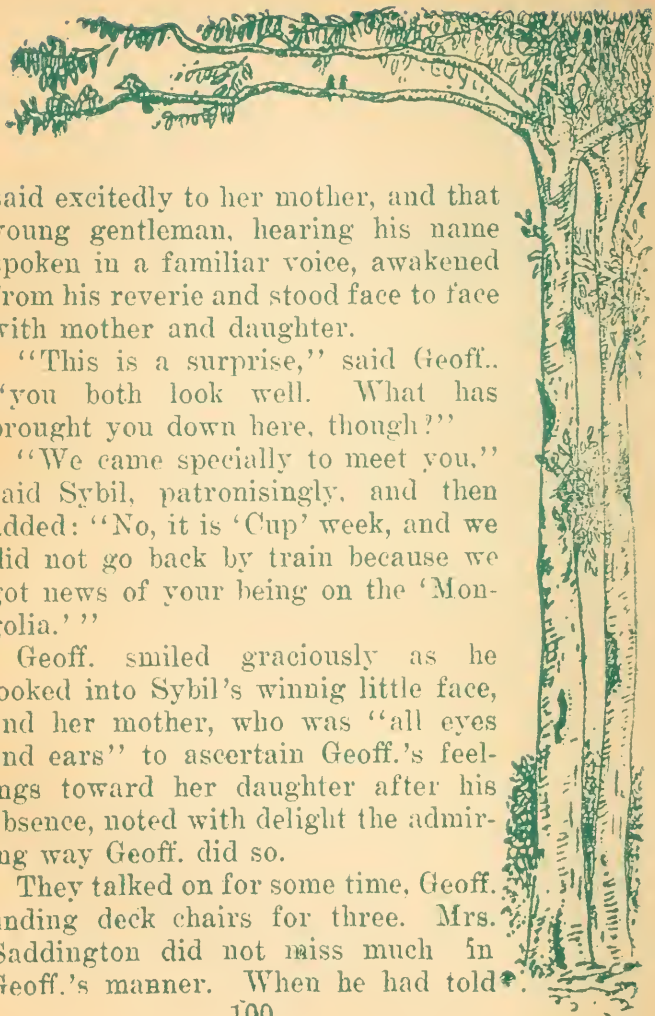
"What the deuce has brought all these people about?" he queried; but soon dropped down to the fact that "the Cup" had been run last Tuesday. "I wonder what won?" and he entered a news agents' shop to buy a weekly illustrated paper on the event.

In the meantime, Geoff. had been equally unaware of the cause of the crowd coming aboard. He was pacing up and down the deck thinking seriously that, now he had come into "Merrillee" as its owner, Sybil would be expecting him to act.

"I wonder if she really knows her own mind? She would not surely get Ralph's photo, and keep it under her pillow, if she did not truly love him; and if she loves Ralph she does not love me," he reflected.

He had not been thinking long, when he almost collided with the very persons of whom he was thinking.

"Why, there's Geoff.!" Sybil had



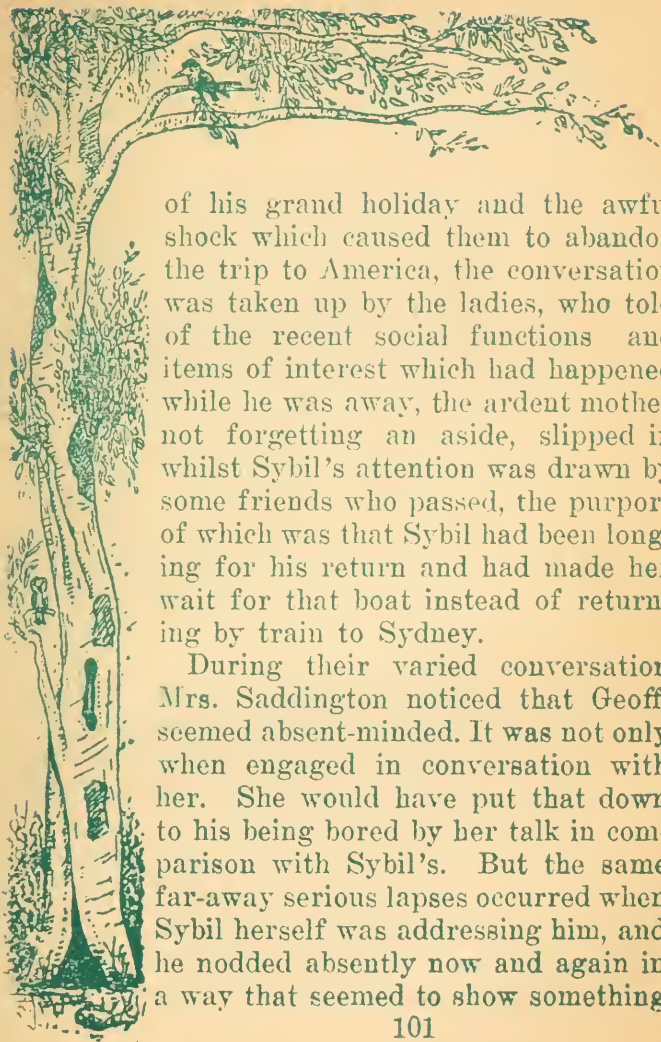
said excitedly to her mother, and that young gentleman, hearing his name spoken in a familiar voice, awakened from his reverie and stood face to face with mother and daughter.

"This is a surprise," said Geoff.. "you both look well. What has brought you down here, though?"

"We came specially to meet you," said Sybil, patronisingly, and then added: "No, it is 'Cup' week, and we did not go back by train because we got news of your being on the 'Mongolia.' "

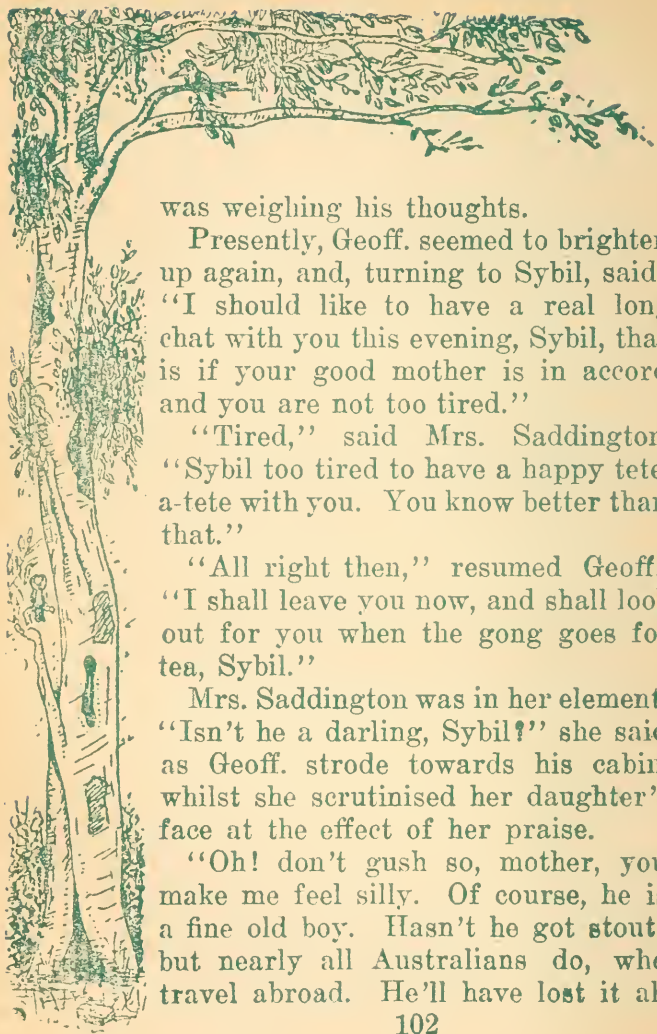
Geoff. smiled graciously as he looked into Sybil's winning little face, and her mother, who was "all eyes and ears" to ascertain Geoff.'s feelings toward her daughter after his absence, noted with delight the admiring way Geoff. did so.

They talked on for some time, Geoff. finding deck chairs for three. Mrs. Saddington did not miss much in Geoff.'s manner. When he had told



of his grand holiday and the awful shock which caused them to abandon the trip to America, the conversation was taken up by the ladies, who told of the recent social functions and items of interest which had happened while he was away, the ardent mother not forgetting an aside, slipped in whilst Sybil's attention was drawn by some friends who passed, the purport of which was that Sybil had been longing for his return and had made her wait for that boat instead of returning by train to Sydney.

During their varied conversation Mrs. Saddington noticed that Geoff. seemed absent-minded. It was not only when engaged in conversation with her. She would have put that down to his being bored by her talk in comparison with Sybil's. But the same far-away serious lapses occurred when Sybil herself was addressing him, and he nodded absently now and again in a way that seemed to show something



was weighing his thoughts.

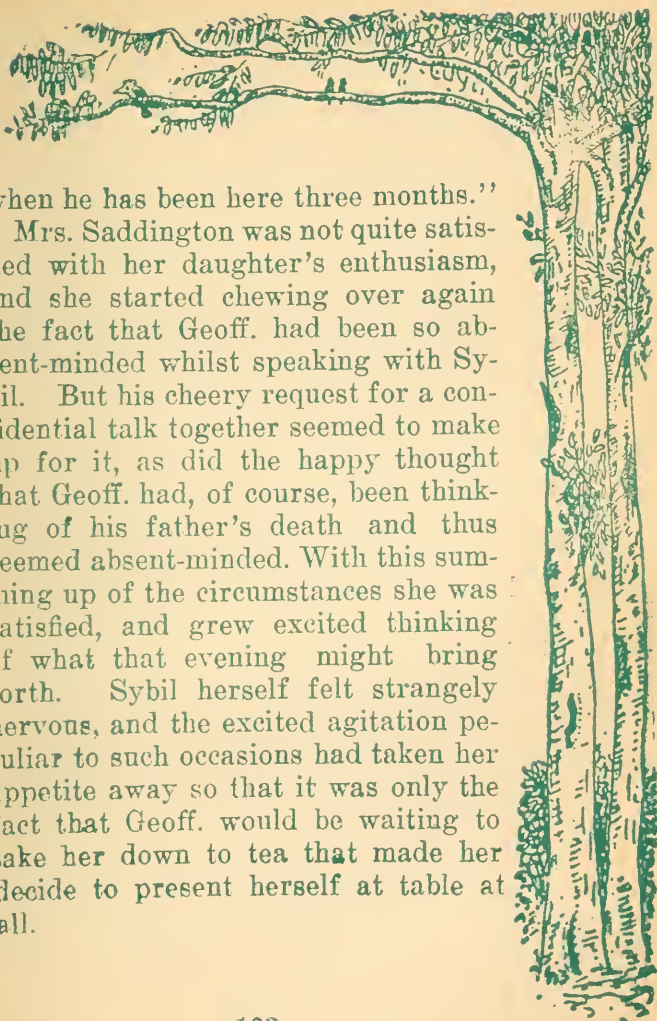
Presently, Geoff. seemed to brighten up again, and, turning to Sybil, said: "I should like to have a real long chat with you this evening, Sybil, that is if your good mother is in accord and you are not too tired."

"Tired," said Mrs. Saddington, "Sybil too tired to have a happy tete-a-tete with you. You know better than that."

"All right then," resumed Geoff., "I shall leave you now, and shall look out for you when the gong goes for tea, Sybil."

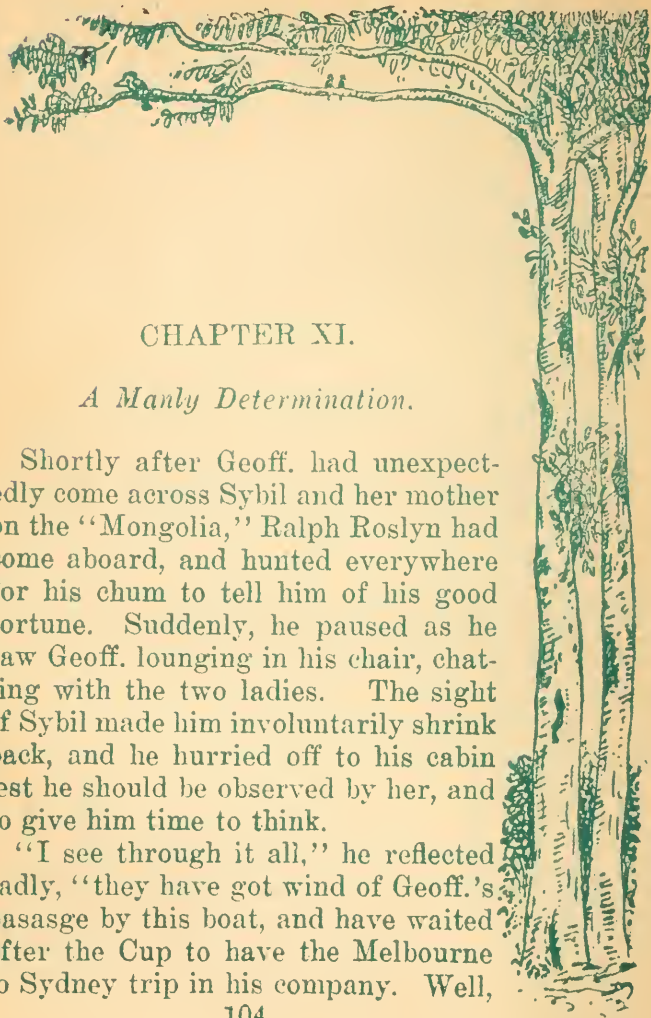
Mrs. Saddington was in her element. "Isn't he a darling, Sybil?" she said as Geoff. strode towards his cabin, whilst she scrutinised her daughter's face at the effect of her praise.

"Oh! don't gush so, mother, you make me feel silly. Of course, he is a fine old boy. Hasn't he got stout! but nearly all Australians do, who travel abroad. He'll have lost it all



when he has been here three months."

Mrs. Saddington was not quite satisfied with her daughter's enthusiasm, and she started chewing over again the fact that Geoff. had been so absent-minded whilst speaking with Sybil. But his cheery request for a confidential talk together seemed to make up for it, as did the happy thought that Geoff. had, of course, been thinking of his father's death and thus seemed absent-minded. With this summing up of the circumstances she was satisfied, and grew excited thinking of what that evening might bring forth. Sybil herself felt strangely nervous, and the excited agitation peculiar to such occasions had taken her appetite away so that it was only the fact that Geoff. would be waiting to take her down to tea that made her decide to present herself at table at all.

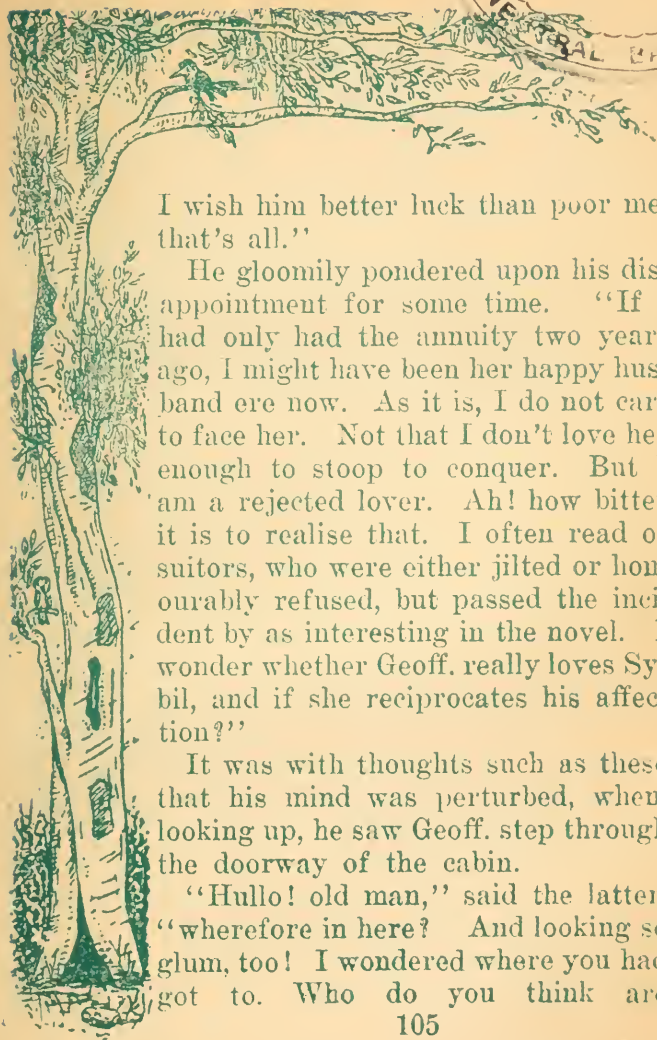


CHAPTER XI.

A Manly Determination.

Shortly after Geoff. had unexpectedly come across Sybil and her mother on the "Mongolia," Ralph Roslyn had come aboard, and hunted everywhere for his chum to tell him of his good fortune. Suddenly, he paused as he saw Geoff. lounging in his chair, chatting with the two ladies. The sight of Sybil made him involuntarily shrink back, and he hurried off to his cabin lest he should be observed by her, and to give him time to think.

"I see through it all," he reflected sadly, "they have got wind of Geoff.'s pasasge by this boat, and have waited after the Cup to have the Melbourne to Sydney trip in his company. Well,

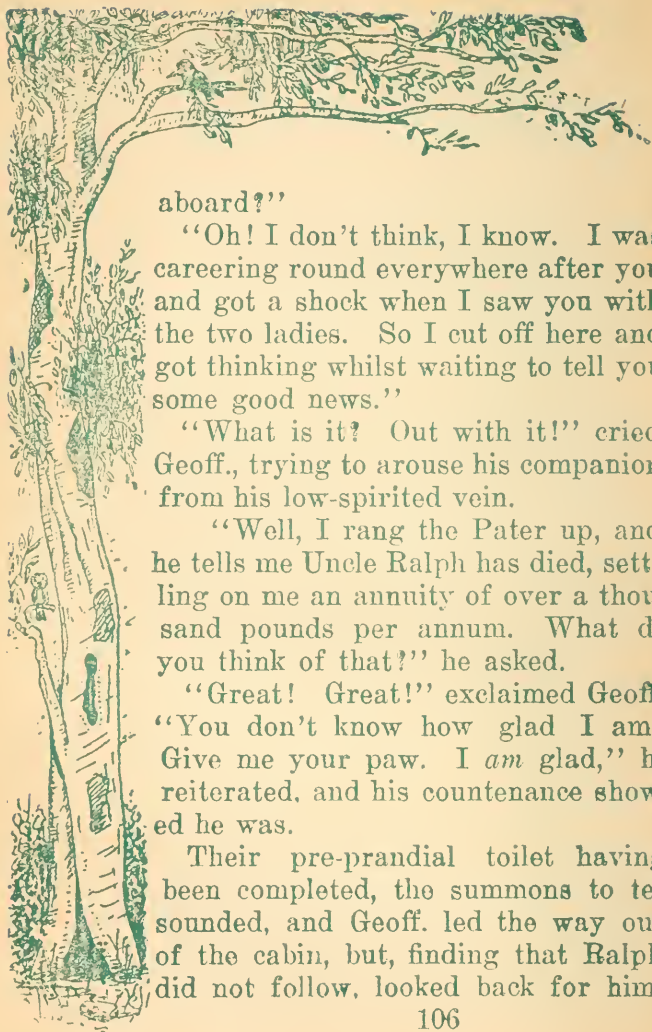


I wish him better luck than poor me, that's all."

He gloomily pondered upon his disappointment for some time. "If I had only had the annuity two years ago, I might have been her happy husband ere now. As it is, I do not care to face her. Not that I don't love her enough to stoop to conquer. But I am a rejected lover. Ah! how bitter it is to realise that. I often read of suitors, who were either jilted or honourably refused, but passed the incident by as interesting in the novel. I wonder whether Geoff. really loves Sybil, and if she reciprocates his affection?"

It was with thoughts such as these that his mind was perturbed, when, looking up, he saw Geoff. step through the doorway of the cabin.

"Hullo! old man," said the latter, "wherefore in here? And looking so glum, too! I wondered where you had got to. Who do you think are



aboard?"

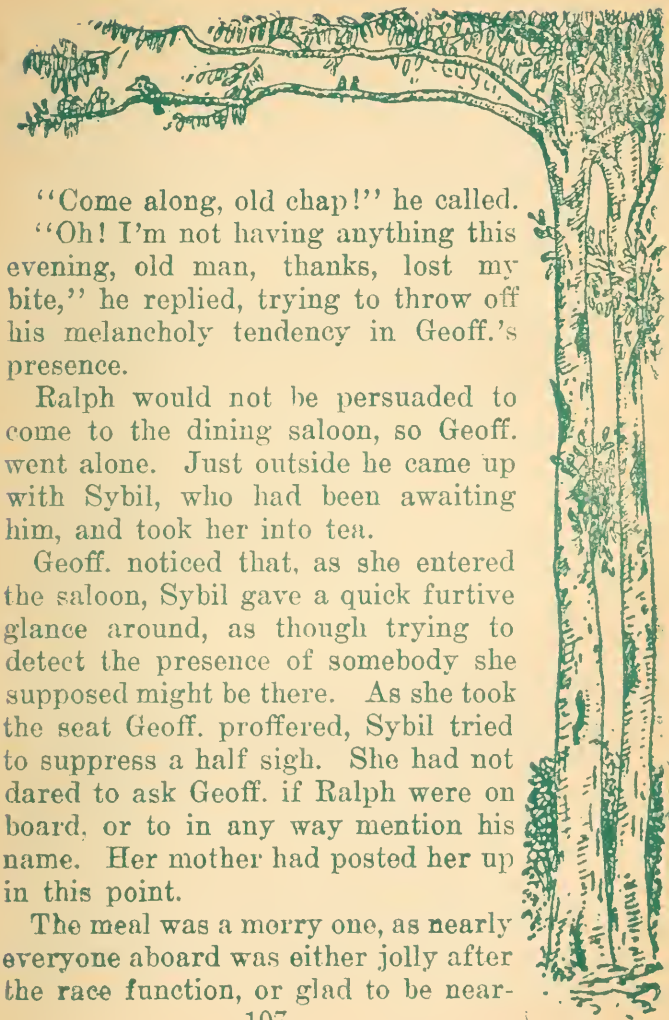
"Oh! I don't think, I know. I was careering round everywhere after you and got a shock when I saw you with the two ladies. So I cut off here and got thinking whilst waiting to tell you some good news."

"What is it? Out with it!" cried Geoff., trying to arouse his companion from his low-spirited vein.

"Well, I rang the Pater up, and he tells me Uncle Ralph has died, settling on me an annuity of over a thousand pounds per annum. What do you think of that?" he asked.

"Great! Great!" exclaimed Geoff. "You don't know how glad I am! Give me your paw. I *am* glad," he reiterated, and his countenance showed he was.

Their pre-prandial toilet having been completed, the summons to tea sounded, and Geoff. led the way out of the cabin, but, finding that Ralph did not follow, looked back for him.



"Come along, old chap!" he called.

"Oh! I'm not having anything this evening, old man, thanks, lost my bite," he replied, trying to throw off his melancholy tendency in Geoff.'s presence.

Ralph would not be persuaded to come to the dining saloon, so Geoff. went alone. Just outside he came up with Sybil, who had been awaiting him, and took her into tea.

Geoff. noticed that, as she entered the saloon, Sybil gave a quick furtive glance around, as though trying to detect the presence of somebody she supposed might be there. As she took the seat Geoff. proffered, Sybil tried to suppress a half sigh. She had not dared to ask Geoff. if Ralph were on board, or to in any way mention his name. Her mother had posted her up in this point.

The meal was a morry one, as nearly everyone aboard was either jolly after the race function, or glad to be near-



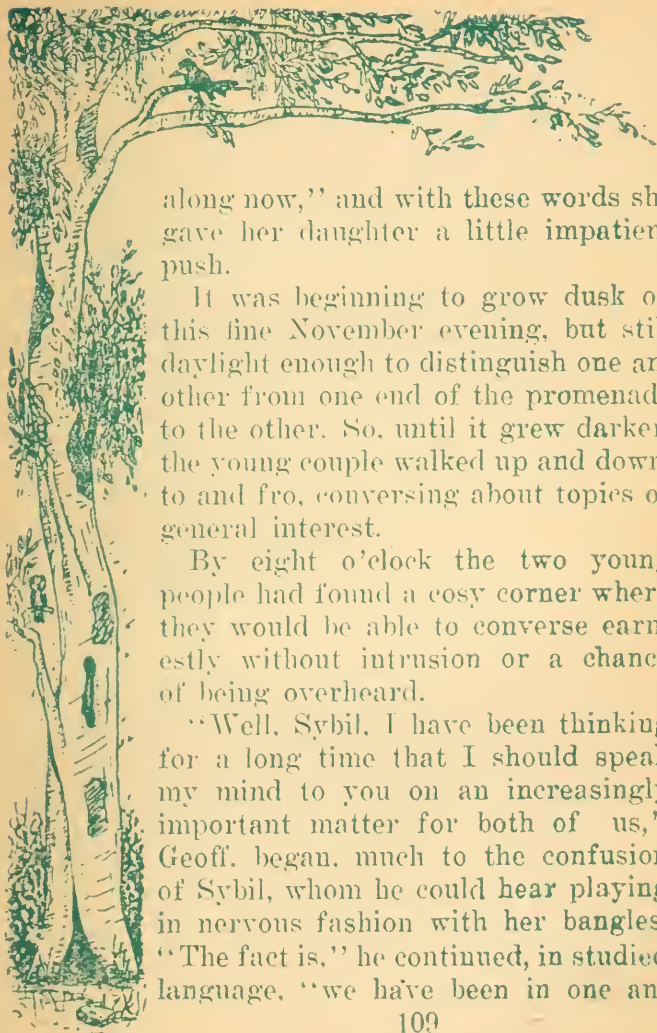
ing his or her destination. Only this night and another before the boat would steam into the grand old harbour of Port Jackson.

Tea over, Geoff. advised Sybil to get her coat, as it would be breezy after dusk, while he popped along to his cabin, on the pretext of getting a muffler, to have a few words with Ralph.

"I say, Ralph, I'm going to leave you to-night. I want to have a chat. So you'll know where I am," and off he went very pleased with himself, though serious about what was before him, that caused the pleasure. He had made up his mind, and felt relieved.

Mrs. Saddington was talking to Sybil quietly, yet insistently, when Geoff. went out on deck, probably instilling her last precepts in love-making, or rather prospecting for gold.

"There he is," that matron whispered excitedly, "there he is coming

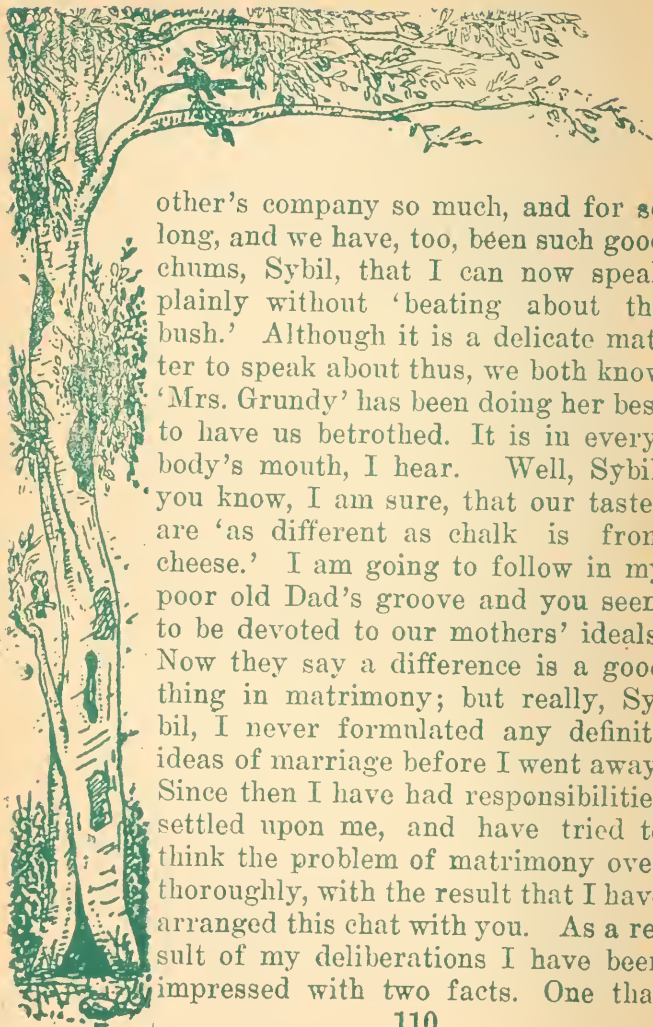


along now," and with these words she gave her daughter a little impatient push.

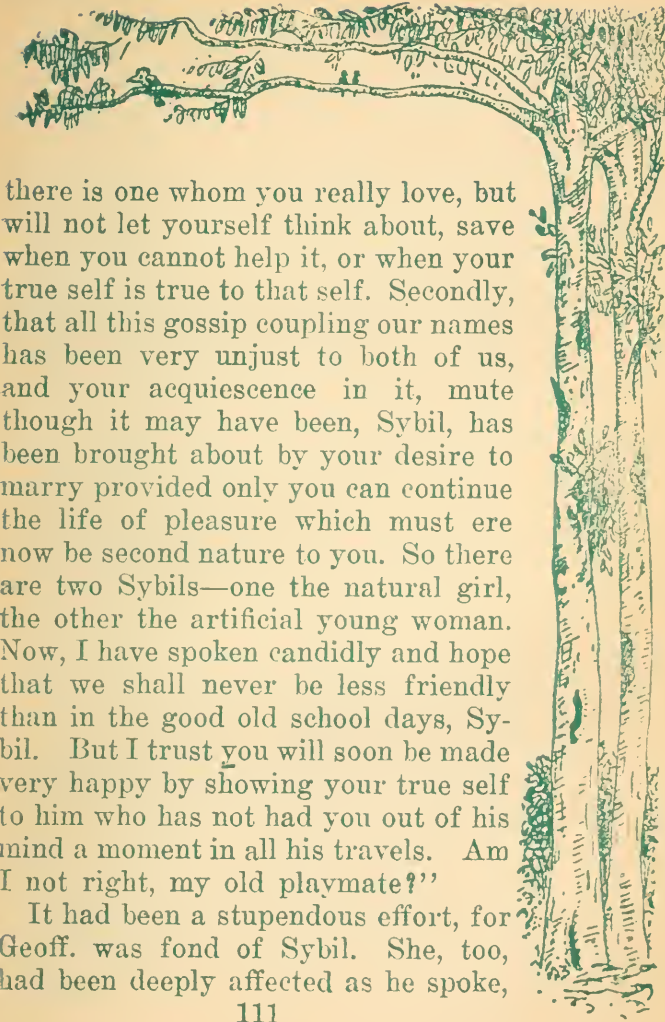
It was beginning to grow dusk on this fine November evening, but still daylight enough to distinguish one another from one end of the promenade to the other. So, until it grew darker, the young couple walked up and down, to and fro, conversing about topics of general interest.

By eight o'clock the two young people had found a cosy corner where they would be able to converse earnestly without intrusion or a chance of being overheard.

"Well, Sybil, I have been thinking for a long time that I should speak my mind to you on an increasingly important matter for both of us," Geoff. began, much to the confusion of Sybil, whom he could hear playing in nervous fashion with her bangles. "The fact is," he continued, in studied language, "we have been in one an-

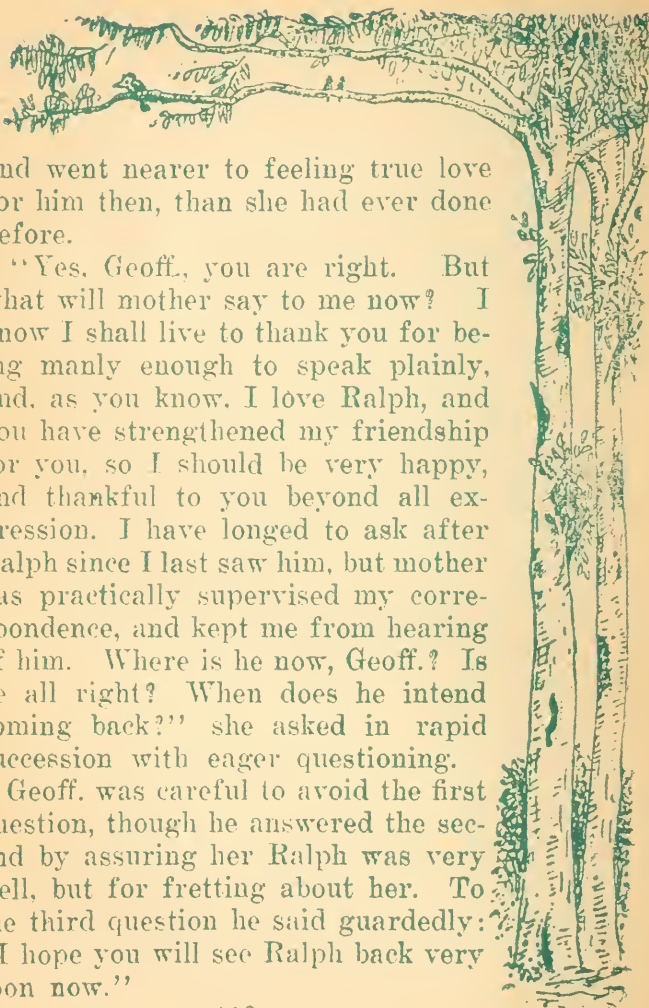


other's company so much, and for so long, and we have, too, been such good chums, Sybil, that I can now speak plainly without 'beating about the bush.' Although it is a delicate matter to speak about thus, we both know 'Mrs. Grundy' has been doing her best to have us betrothed. It is in everybody's mouth, I hear. Well, Sybil, you know, I am sure, that our tastes are 'as different as chalk is from cheese.' I am going to follow in my poor old Dad's groove and you seem to be devoted to our mothers' ideals. Now they say a difference is a good thing in matrimony; but really, Sybil, I never formulated any definite ideas of marriage before I went away. Since then I have had responsibilities settled upon me, and have tried to think the problem of matrimony over thoroughly, with the result that I have arranged this chat with you. As a result of my deliberations I have been impressed with two facts. One that



there is one whom you really love, but will not let yourself think about, save when you cannot help it, or when your true self is true to that self. Secondly, that all this gossip coupling our names has been very unjust to both of us, and your acquiescence in it, mute though it may have been, Sybil, has been brought about by your desire to marry provided only you can continue the life of pleasure which must ere now be second nature to you. So there are two Sybils—one the natural girl, the other the artificial young woman. Now, I have spoken candidly and hope that we shall never be less friendly than in the good old school days, Sybil. But I trust you will soon be made very happy by showing your true self to him who has not had you out of his mind a moment in all his travels. Am I not right, my old playmate?"

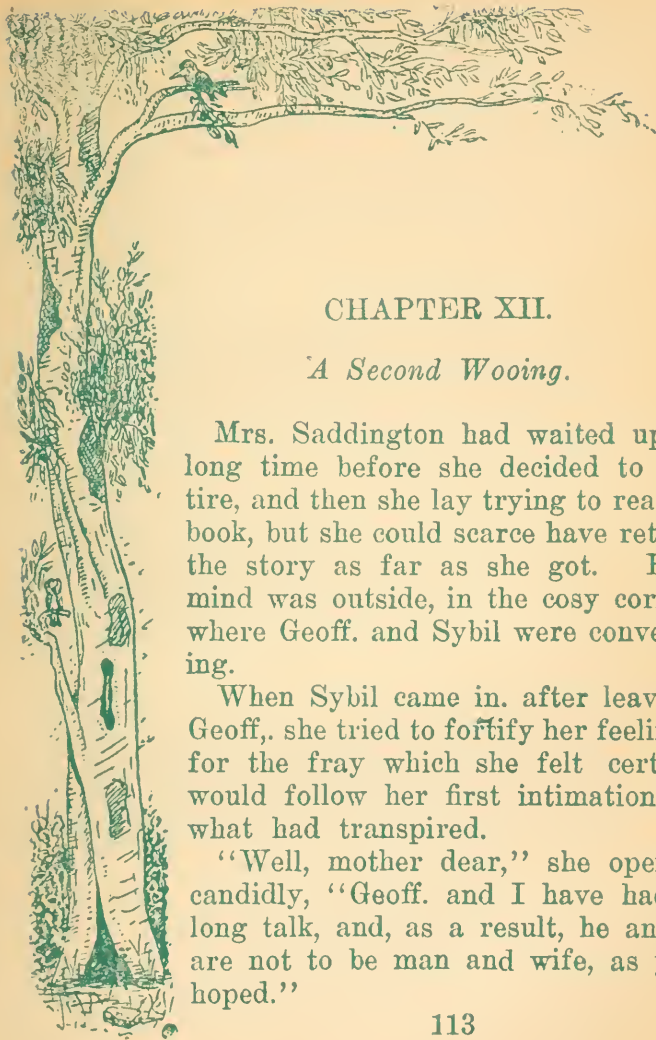
It had been a stupendous effort, for Geoff. was fond of Sybil. She, too, had been deeply affected as he spoke,



and went nearer to feeling true love for him then, than she had ever done before.

"Yes, Geoff., you are right. But what will mother say to me now? I know I shall live to thank you for being manly enough to speak plainly, and, as you know, I love Ralph, and you have strengthened my friendship for you, so I should be very happy, and thankful to you beyond all expression. I have longed to ask after Ralph since I last saw him, but mother has practically supervised my correspondence, and kept me from hearing of him. Where is he now, Geoff.? Is he all right? When does he intend coming back?" she asked in rapid succession with eager questioning.

Geoff. was careful to avoid the first question, though he answered the second by assuring her Ralph was very well, but for fretting about her. To the third question he said guardedly: "I hope you will see Ralph back very soon now."



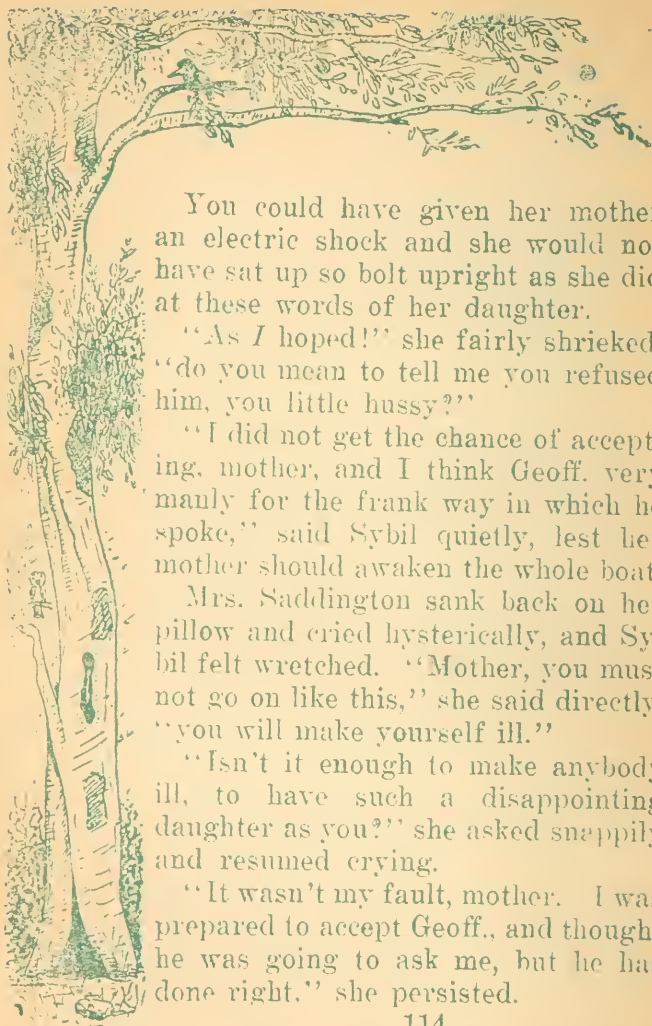
CHAPTER XII.

A Second Wooing.

Mrs. Saddington had waited up a long time before she decided to retire, and then she lay trying to read a book, but she could scarce have retold the story as far as she got. Her mind was outside, in the cosy corner where Geoff. and Sybil were conversing.

When Sybil came in. after leaving Geoff., she tried to fortify her feelings for the fray which she felt certain would follow her first intimation of what had transpired.

“Well, mother dear,” she opened candidly, “Geoff. and I have had a long talk, and, as a result, he and I are not to be man and wife, as you hoped.”



You could have given her mother an electric shock and she would not have sat up so bolt upright as she did at these words of her daughter.


"As I hoped!" she fairly shrieked, "do you mean to tell me you refused him, you little hussy?"

"I did not get the chance of accepting, mother, and I think Geoff. very manly for the frank way in which he spoke," said Sybil quietly, lest her mother should awaken the whole boat.

Mrs. Saddlington sank back on her pillow and cried hysterically, and Sybil felt wretched. "Mother, you must not go on like this," she said directly, "you will make yourself ill."

"Isn't it enough to make anybody ill, to have such a disappointing daughter as you?" she asked snappily and resumed crying.

"It wasn't my fault, mother. I was prepared to accept Geoff., and thought he was going to ask me, but he has done right," she persisted.



“Don’t tell me that,” muttered her mother sharply, between her sobs.

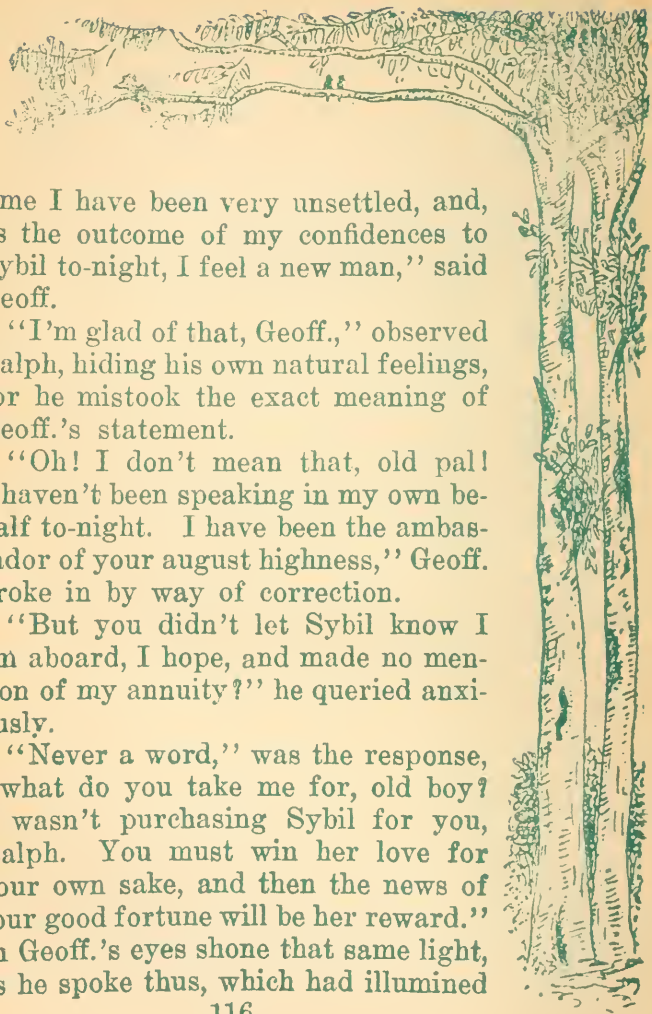
“I think it is I who should be cut up about it,” continued Sybil, “and I should be, only for knowing how unhappy I have been since the night I refused Ralph at “Lang Syne.”

But nothing would pacify the disappointed woman, who slept lightly all night. Sybil slept well for the first few hours, but, in the early morning, she rose and prepared to go out on deck. She could not rest for her thoughts, and wished to avoid her mother’s harsh attitude which she feared would be repeated upon her awakening.

Whilst Sybil was deciding to rise thus early, Ralph Roslyn, in his cabin, had already done so.

When Geoff. had turned in, after the previous evening with Sybil, he disturbed Ralph, who slept poorly.

“Well, I have relieved my mind greatly to-night, old pal. For some



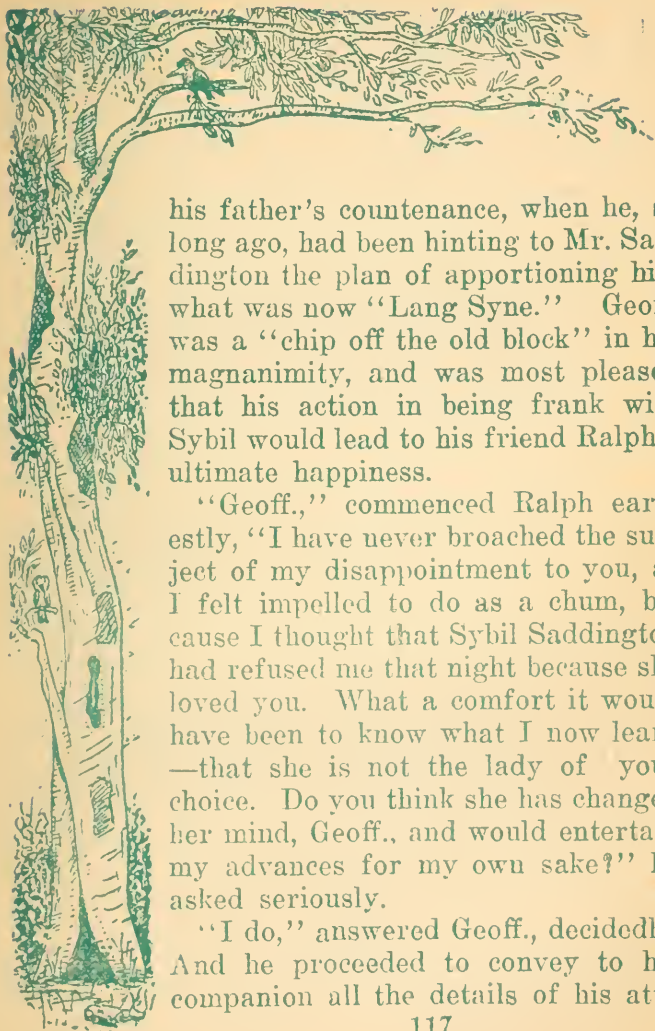
time I have been very unsettled, and, as the outcome of my confidences to Sybil to-night, I feel a new man," said Geoff.

"I'm glad of that, Geoff.," observed Ralph, hiding his own natural feelings, for he mistook the exact meaning of Geoff.'s statement.

"Oh! I don't mean that, old pal! I haven't been speaking in my own behalf to-night. I have been the ambassador of your august highness," Geoff. broke in by way of correction.

"But you didn't let Sybil know I am aboard, I hope, and made no mention of my annuity?" he queried anxiously.

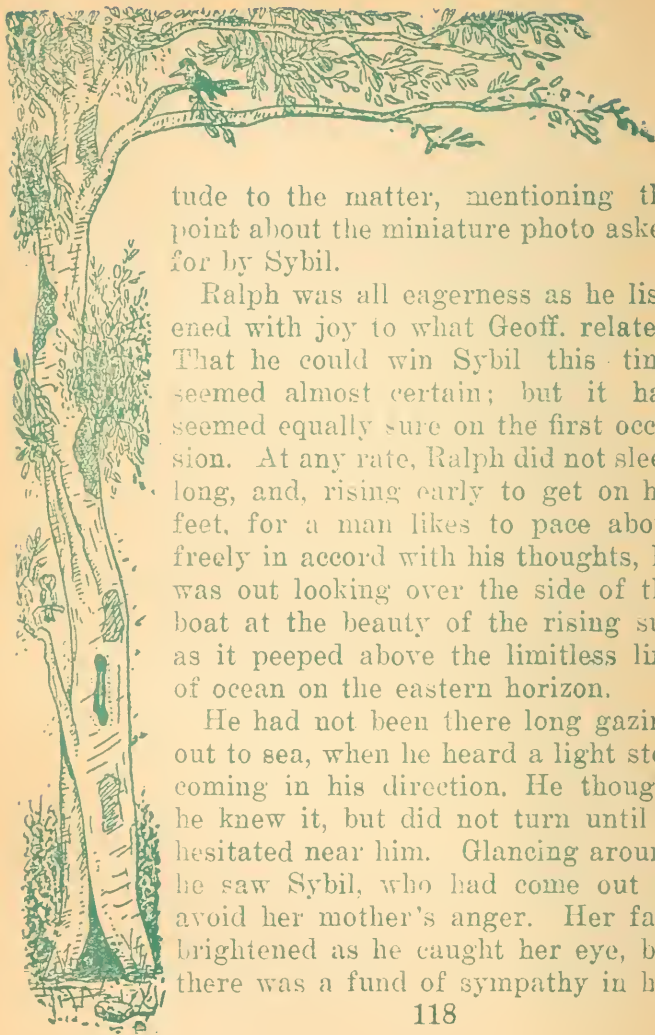
"Never a word," was the response, "what do you take me for, old boy? I wasn't purchasing Sybil for you, Ralph. You must win her love for your own sake, and then the news of your good fortune will be her reward." In Geoff.'s eyes shone that same light, as he spoke thus, which had illumined



his father's countenance, when he, so long ago, had been hinting to Mr. Saddington the plan of apportioning him what was now "Lang Syne." Geoff. was a "chip off the old block" in his magnanimity, and was most pleased that his action in being frank with Sybil would lead to his friend Ralph's ultimate happiness.

"Geoff.," commenced Ralph earnestly, "I have never broached the subject of my disappointment to you, as I felt impelled to do as a chum, because I thought that Sybil Saddington had refused me that night because she loved you. What a comfort it would have been to know what I now learn—that she is not the lady of your choice. Do you think she has changed her mind, Geoff., and would entertain my advances for my own sake?" he asked seriously.

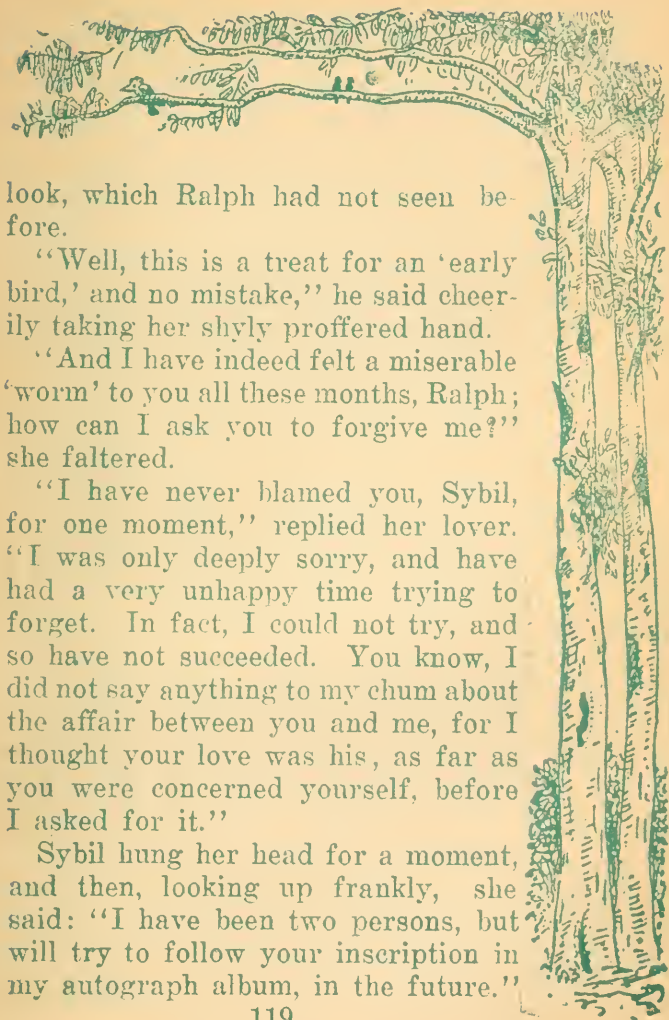
"I do," answered Geoff., decidedly. And he proceeded to convey to his companion all the details of his atti-



tude to the matter, mentioning the point about the miniature photo asked for by Sybil.

Ralph was all eagerness as he listened with joy to what Geoff. related. That he could win Sybil this time seemed almost certain; but it had seemed equally sure on the first occasion. At any rate, Ralph did not sleep long, and, rising early to get on his feet, for a man likes to pace about freely in accord with his thoughts, he was out looking over the side of the boat at the beauty of the rising sun as it peeped above the limitless line of ocean on the eastern horizon.

He had not been there long gazing out to sea, when he heard a light step coming in his direction. He thought he knew it, but did not turn until it hesitated near him. Glancing around he saw Sybil, who had come out to avoid her mother's anger. Her face brightened as he caught her eye, but there was a fund of sympathy in her



look, which Ralph had not seen before.

"Well, this is a treat for an 'early bird,' and no mistake," he said cheerily taking her shyly proffered hand.

"And I have indeed felt a miserable 'worm' to you all these months, Ralph; how can I ask you to forgive me?" she faltered.

"I have never blamed you, Sybil, for one moment," replied her lover. "I was only deeply sorry, and have had a very unhappy time trying to forget. In fact, I could not try, and so have not succeeded. You know, I did not say anything to my chum about the affair between you and me, for I thought your love was his, as far as you were concerned yourself, before I asked for it."

Sybil hung her head for a moment, and then, looking up frankly, she said: "I have been two persons, but will try to follow your inscription in my autograph album, in the future."



“Well, Sybil, after the crushing disappointment last time I could not face another refusal from your lips,” he continued, “but I shall not be happy until I have asked you that question over again. But not now, not now. If you want me to ask it, just meet me here before tea this evening, and, if you are there to take my arm and go in with me to the table, I shall have a little confab. with you afterwards. I don’t want to take advantage of your feelings of sympathy now.”

Just then the breakfast summons clanged, and Sybil went off to tidy her hair, which had been disordered slightly by the stiff land breeze.

Mrs. Saddington did not appear at meals all that day, which seemed a long one for the young couple. Geoff. had busied himself at the usual deck games, and the two friends were free to enjoy one another’s company.

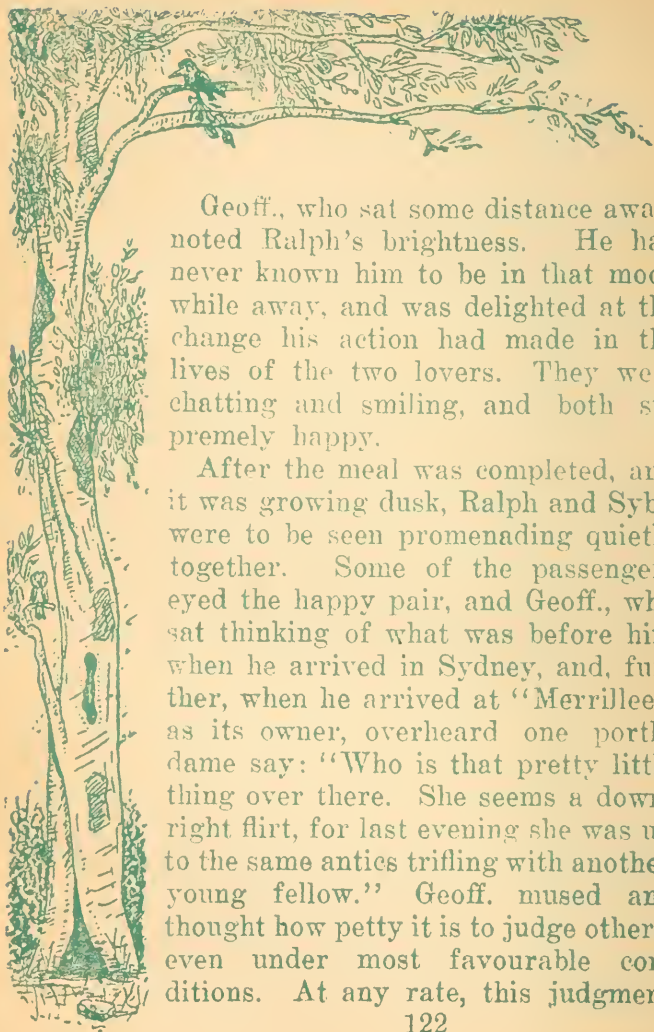


CHAPTER XIII.

"All's Well that Ends Well."

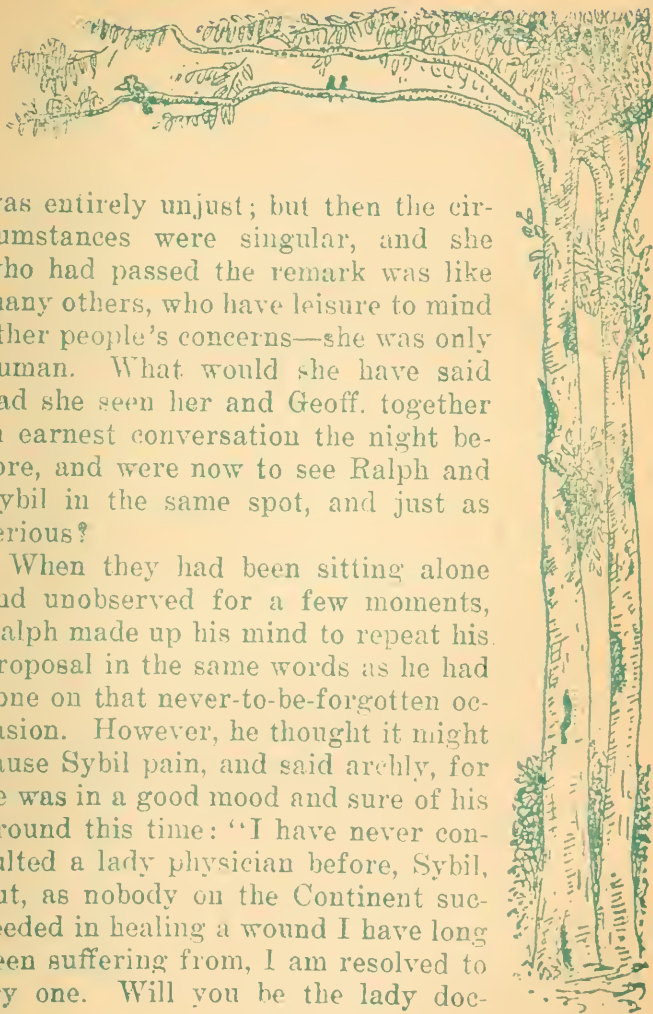
Two hearts were thrilled, when, on the second of the two evenings of the voyage from Melbourne, the travellers to Sydney were called to their last tea on board for that trip.

Sybil kept within her cabin as though she did not wish to come before the gaze of the assembling folk. Could it be that she had listened to her old self once more, and had decided not to fulfil Ralph's invitation to take her to tea, because of its signification? No. For, as soon as she heard his step upon the deck, out she popped and with a beaming smile took Ralph's proffered arm, and he was happy.



Geoff., who sat some distance away, noted Ralph's brightness. He had never known him to be in that mood while away, and was delighted at the change his action had made in the lives of the two lovers. They were chatting and smiling, and both supremely happy.

After the meal was completed, and it was growing dusk, Ralph and Sybil were to be seen promenading quietly together. Some of the passengers eyed the happy pair, and Geoff., who sat thinking of what was before him when he arrived in Sydney, and, further, when he arrived at "Merrillee" as its owner, overheard one portly dame say: "Who is that pretty little thing over there. She seems a downright flirt, for last evening she was up to the same antics trifling with another young fellow." Geoff. mused and thought how petty it is to judge others, even under most favourable conditions. At any rate, this judgment



was entirely unjust; but then the circumstances were singular, and she who had passed the remark was like many others, who have leisure to mind other people's concerns—she was only human. What would she have said had she seen her and Geoff. together in earnest conversation the night before, and were now to see Ralph and Sybil in the same spot, and just as serious?

When they had been sitting alone and unobserved for a few moments, Ralph made up his mind to repeat his proposal in the same words as he had done on that never-to-be-forgotten occasion. However, he thought it might cause Sybil pain, and said archly, for he was in a good mood and sure of his ground this time: "I have never consulted a lady physician before, Sybil, but, as nobody on the Continent succeeded in healing a wound I have long been suffering from, I am resolved to try one. Will you be the lady doc-



tor?"

"Am I competent to fulfil the part, Ralph?" she asked, looking up into his handsome face.

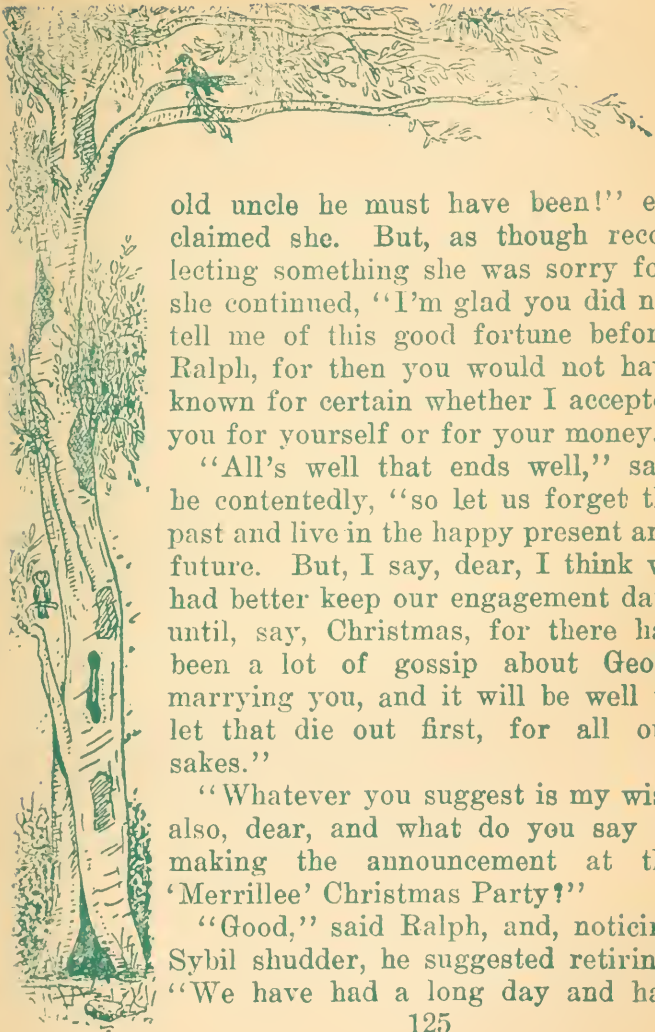
"Did I not know full well that you are the only one qualified to do so," answered he, "I would not now ask it of you, little girl."

"Then, I'll try," she said simply, placing her hand in his, and resting her little head on his broad shoulder as he drew her closer to him.

"I have not told you, dearest, of a stroke of luck I have heard of since arriving in Australia. I thought it better to give you a surprise now, and not before, because now it is good fortune also for you. I have come in for an annuity of over a thousand pounds."

Sybil recollected the excuse she had made in her former refusal of his love at "Lang Syne," and, with difficulty, repressed a sigh.

"How pleased I am! What a good

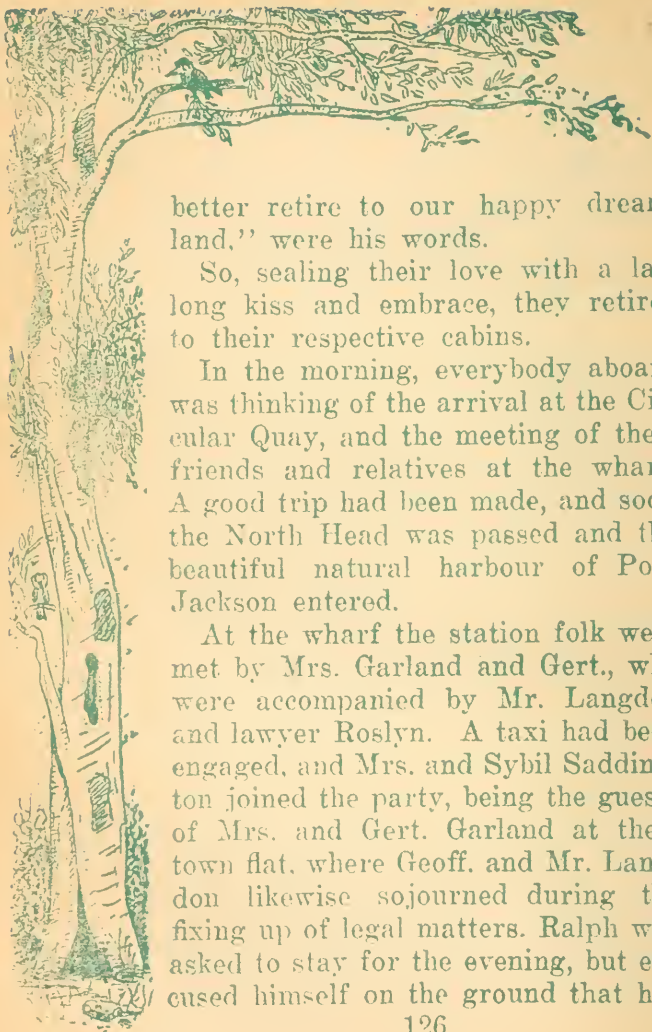


old uncle he must have been!" exclaimed she. But, as though recollecting something she was sorry for, she continued, "I'm glad you did not tell me of this good fortune before, Ralph, for then you would not have known for certain whether I accepted you for yourself or for your money."

"All's well that ends well," said he contentedly, "so let us forget the past and live in the happy present and future. But, I say, dear, I think we had better keep our engagement dark until, say, Christmas, for there has been a lot of gossip about Geoff. marrying you, and it will be well to let that die out first, for all our sakes."

"Whatever you suggest is my wish also, dear, and what do you say to making the announcement at the 'Merrilee' Christmas Party?"

"Good," said Ralph, and, noticing Sybil shudder, he suggested retiring. "We have had a long day and had



better retire to our happy dream-land," were his words.

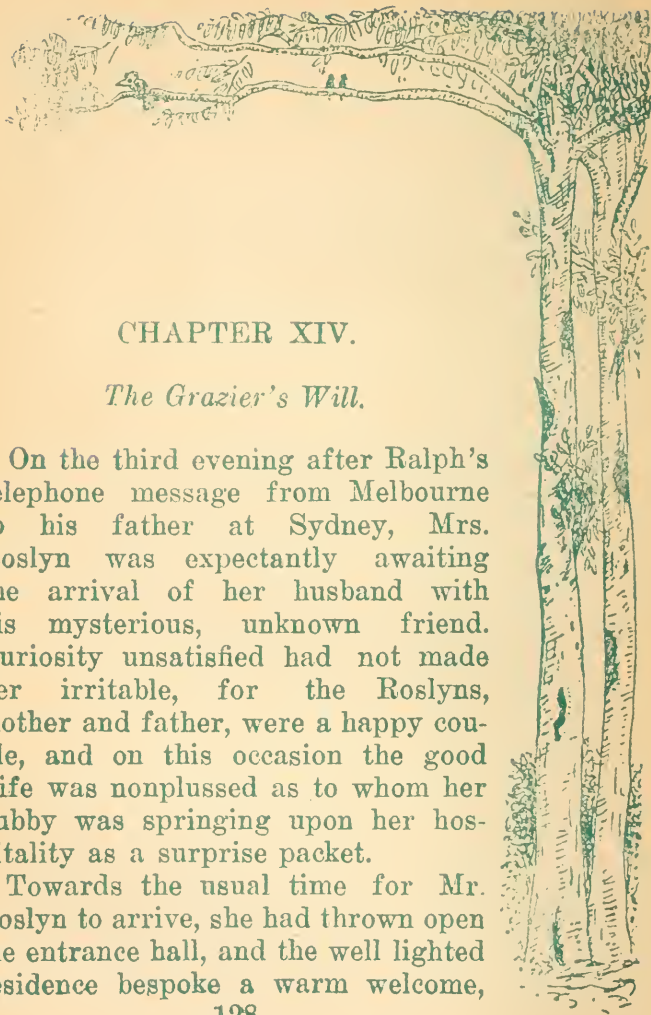
So, sealing their love with a last long kiss and embrace, they retired to their respective cabins.

In the morning, everybody aboard was thinking of the arrival at the Circular Quay, and the meeting of their friends and relatives at the wharf. A good trip had been made, and soon the North Head was passed and the beautiful natural harbour of Port Jackson entered.

At the wharf the station folk were met by Mrs. Garland and Gert., who were accompanied by Mr. Langdon and lawyer Roslyn. A taxi had been engaged, and Mrs. and Sybil Saddington joined the party, being the guests of Mrs. and Gert. Garland at their town flat, where Geoff. and Mr. Langdon likewise sojourned during the fixing up of legal matters. Ralph was asked to stay for the evening, but excused himself on the ground that his

mother would be longing to see him. He had pre-arranged the surprise his mother was to get, when he rang his father from Melbourne, and, much as he would have liked to be near Sybil, he remembered his duty to his mother.



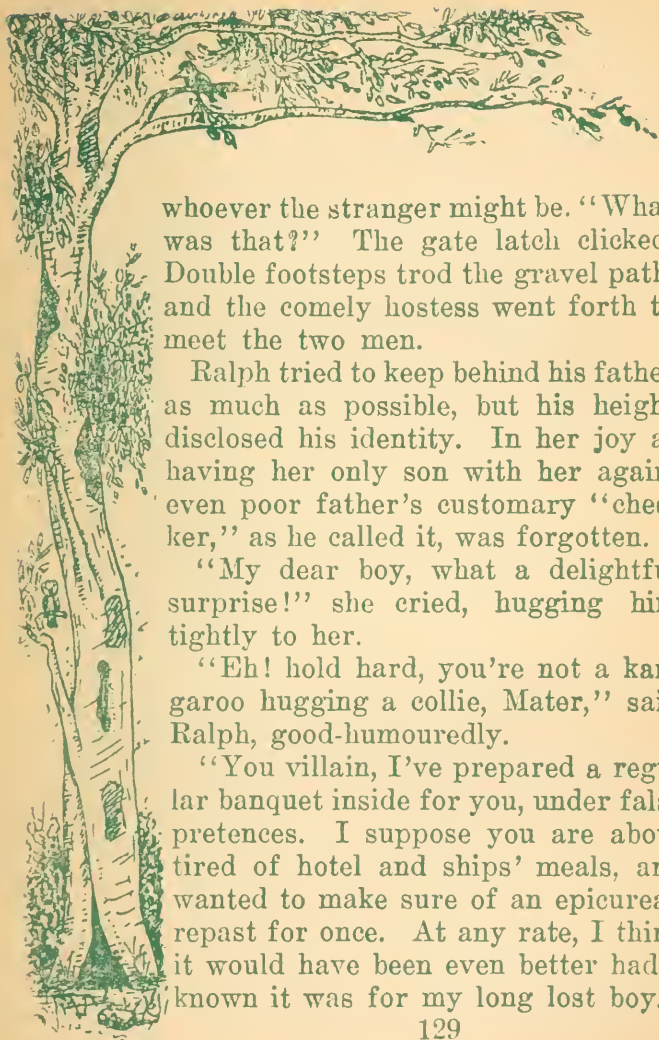


CHAPTER XIV.

The Grazier's Will.

On the third evening after Ralph's telephone message from Melbourne to his father at Sydney, Mrs. Roslyn was expectantly awaiting the arrival of her husband with his mysterious, unknown friend. Curiosity unsatisfied had not made her irritable, for the Roslyns, mother and father, were a happy couple, and on this occasion the good wife was nonplussed as to whom her hubby was springing upon her hospitality as a surprise packet.

Towards the usual time for Mr. Roslyn to arrive, she had thrown open the entrance hall, and the well lighted residence bespoke a warm welcome,



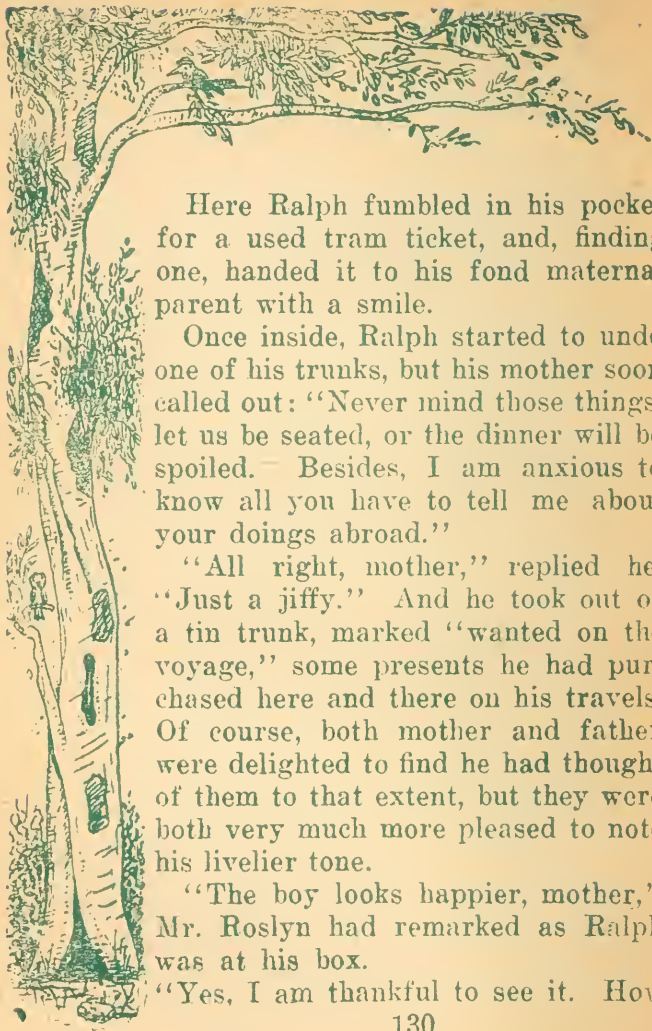
whoever the stranger might be. "What was that?" The gate latch clicked. Double footsteps trod the gravel path, and the comely hostess went forth to meet the two men.

Ralph tried to keep behind his father as much as possible, but his height disclosed his identity. In her joy at having her only son with her again, even poor father's customary "chee-ker," as he called it, was forgotten.

"My dear boy, what a delightful surprise!" she cried, hugging him tightly to her.

"Eh! hold hard, you're not a kangaroo hugging a collie, Mater," said Ralph, good-humouredly.

"You villain, I've prepared a regular banquet inside for you, under false pretences. I suppose you are about tired of hotel and ships' meals, and wanted to make sure of an epicurean repast for once. At any rate, I think it would have been even better had I known it was for my long lost boy."



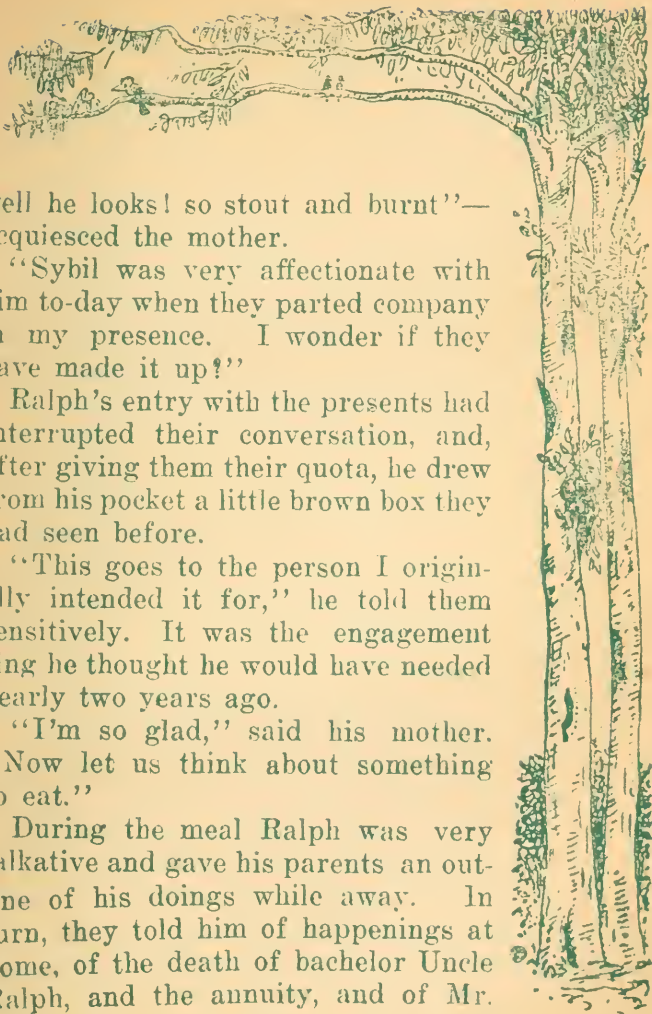
Here Ralph fumbled in his pocket for a used tram ticket, and, finding one, handed it to his fond maternal parent with a smile.

Once inside, Ralph started to undo one of his trunks, but his mother soon called out: "Never mind those things, let us be seated, or the dinner will be spoiled. — Besides, I am anxious to know all you have to tell me about your doings abroad."

"All right, mother," replied he, "Just a jiffy." And he took out of a tin trunk, marked "wanted on the voyage," some presents he had purchased here and there on his travels. Of course, both mother and father were delighted to find he had thought of them to that extent, but they were both very much more pleased to note his livelier tone.

"The boy looks happier, mother," Mr. Roslyn had remarked as Ralph was at his box.

"Yes, I am thankful to see it. How



well he looks! so stout and burnt"—
acquiesced the mother.

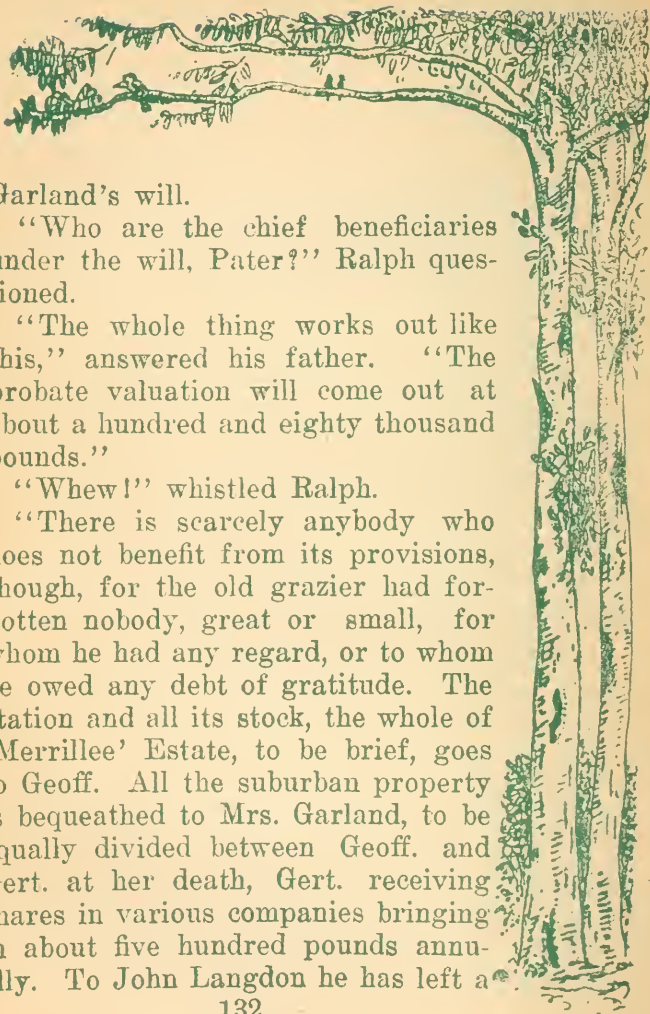
"Sybil was very affectionate with
him to-day when they parted company
in my presence. I wonder if they
have made it up?"

Ralph's entry with the presents had
interrupted their conversation, and,
after giving them their quota, he drew
from his pocket a little brown box they
had seen before.

"This goes to the person I origin-
ally intended it for," he told them
sensitively. It was the engagement
ring he thought he would have needed
nearly two years ago.

"I'm so glad," said his mother.
"Now let us think about something
to eat."

During the meal Ralph was very
talkative and gave his parents an out-
line of his doings while away. In
turn, they told him of happenings at
home, of the death of bachelor Uncle
Ralph, and the annuity, and of Mr.



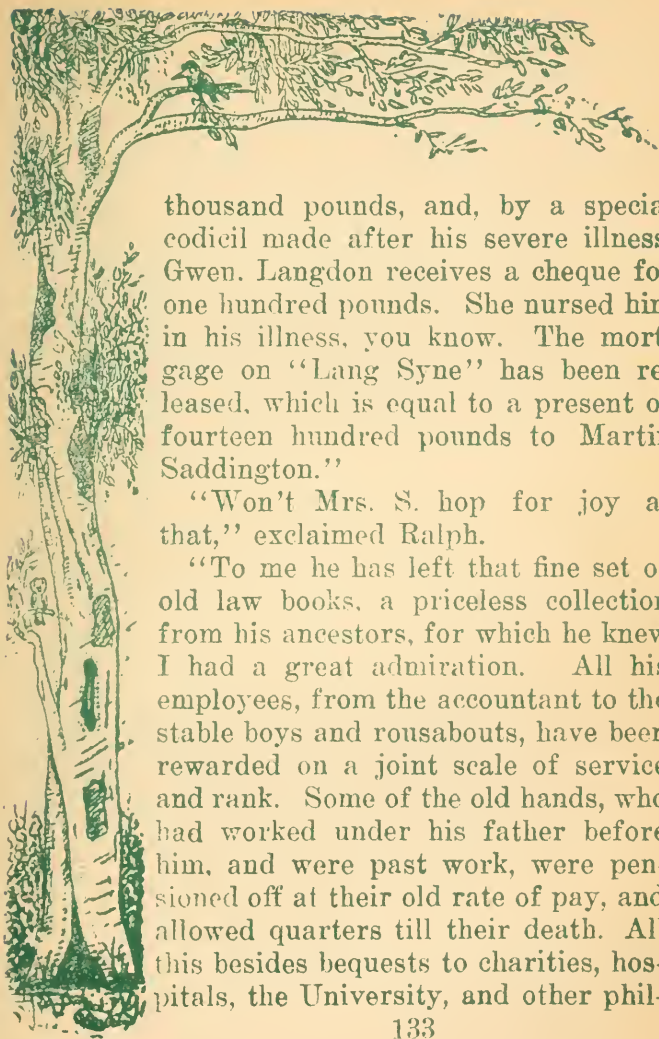
Garland's will.

"Who are the chief beneficiaries under the will, Pater?" Ralph questioned.

"The whole thing works out like this," answered his father. "The probate valuation will come out at about a hundred and eighty thousand pounds."

"Whew!" whistled Ralph.

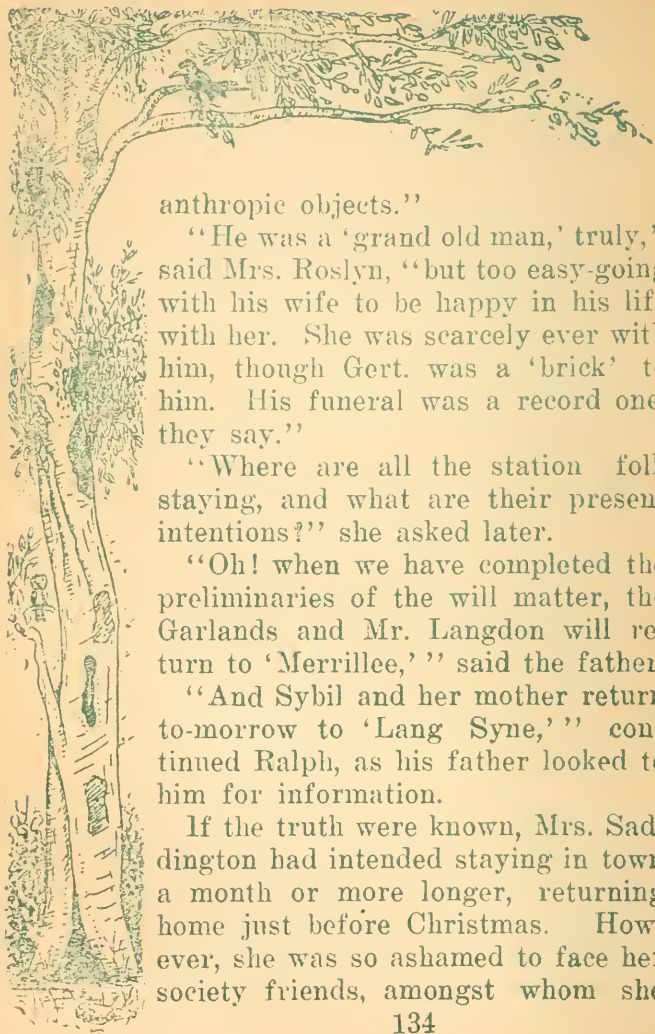
"There is scarcely anybody who does not benefit from its provisions, though, for the old grazier had forgotten nobody, great or small, for whom he had any regard, or to whom he owed any debt of gratitude. The station and all its stock, the whole of 'Merrillee' Estate, to be brief, goes to Geoff. All the suburban property is bequeathed to Mrs. Garland, to be equally divided between Geoff. and Gert. at her death, Gert. receiving shares in various companies bringing in about five hundred pounds annually. To John Langdon he has left a



thousand pounds, and, by a special codicil made after his severe illness, Gwen. Langdon receives a cheque for one hundred pounds. She nursed him in his illness, you know. The mortgage on "Lang Syne" has been released, which is equal to a present of fourteen hundred pounds to Martin Saddington."

"Won't Mrs. S. hop for joy at that," exclaimed Ralph.

"To me he has left that fine set of old law books, a priceless collection from his ancestors, for which he knew I had a great admiration. All his employees, from the accountant to the stable boys and rousabouts, have been rewarded on a joint scale of service and rank. Some of the old hands, who had worked under his father before him, and were past work, were pensioned off at their old rate of pay, and allowed quarters till their death. All this besides bequests to charities, hospitals, the University, and other phil-



anthropic objects."

"He was a 'grand old man,' truly," said Mrs. Roslyn, "but too easy-going with his wife to be happy in his life with her. She was scarcely ever with him, though Gert. was a 'brick' to him. His funeral was a record one, they say."

"Where are all the station folk staying, and what are their present intentions?" she asked later.

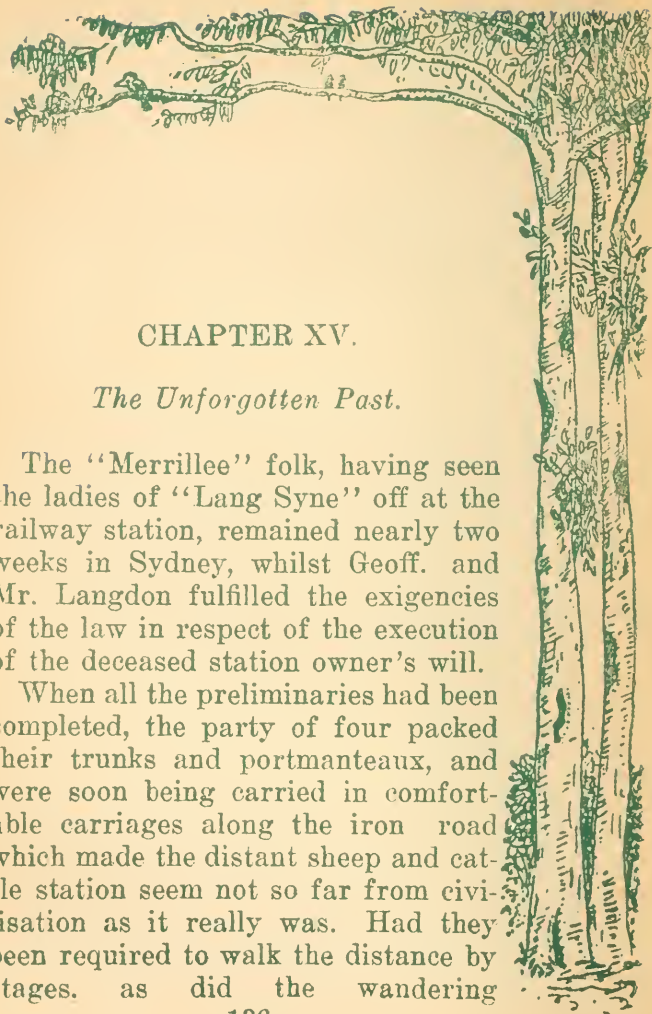
"Oh! when we have completed the preliminaries of the will matter, the Garlands and Mr. Langdon will return to 'Merrillee,' " said the father.

"And Sybil and her mother return to-morrow to 'Lang Syne,' " continued Ralph, as his father looked to him for information.

If the truth were known, Mrs. Saddington had intended staying in town a month or more longer, returning home just before Christmas. However, she was so ashamed to face her society friends, amongst whom she

had boasted of Geoff.'s attentions to Sybil, largely imaginary as they were, that she took the most sensible course for the young couple, and decided for home at first opportunity. This worked in with Ralph's forethought in telling Sybil to impress upon her mother not to let the secret out until Christmas.



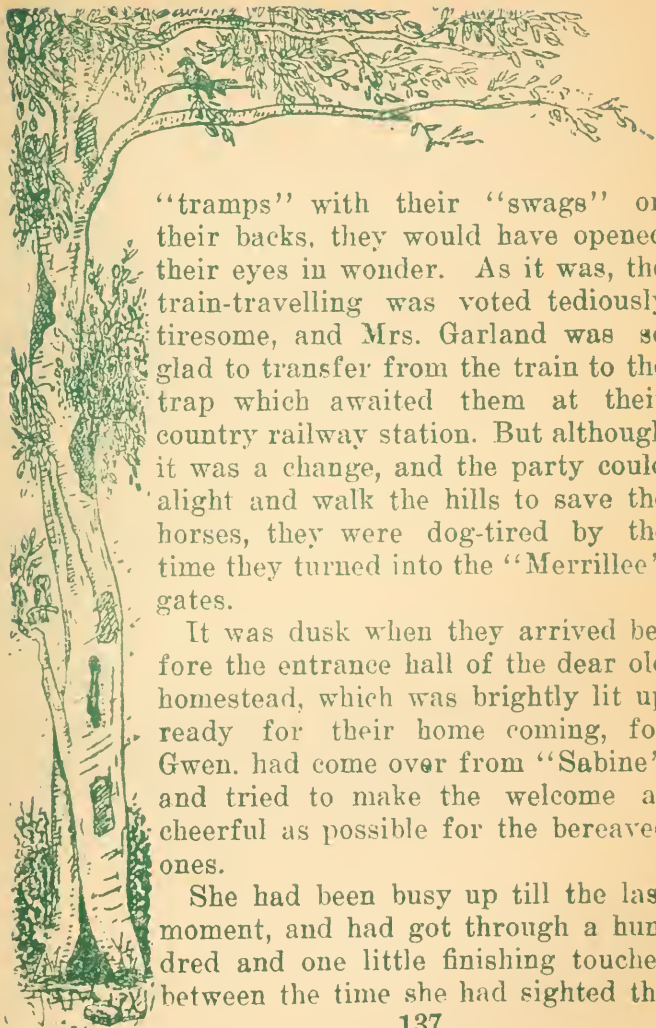


CHAPTER XV.

The Unforgotten Past.

The "Merrillee" folk, having seen the ladies of "Lang Syne" off at the railway station, remained nearly two weeks in Sydney, whilst Geoff. and Mr. Langdon fulfilled the exigencies of the law in respect of the execution of the deceased station owner's will.

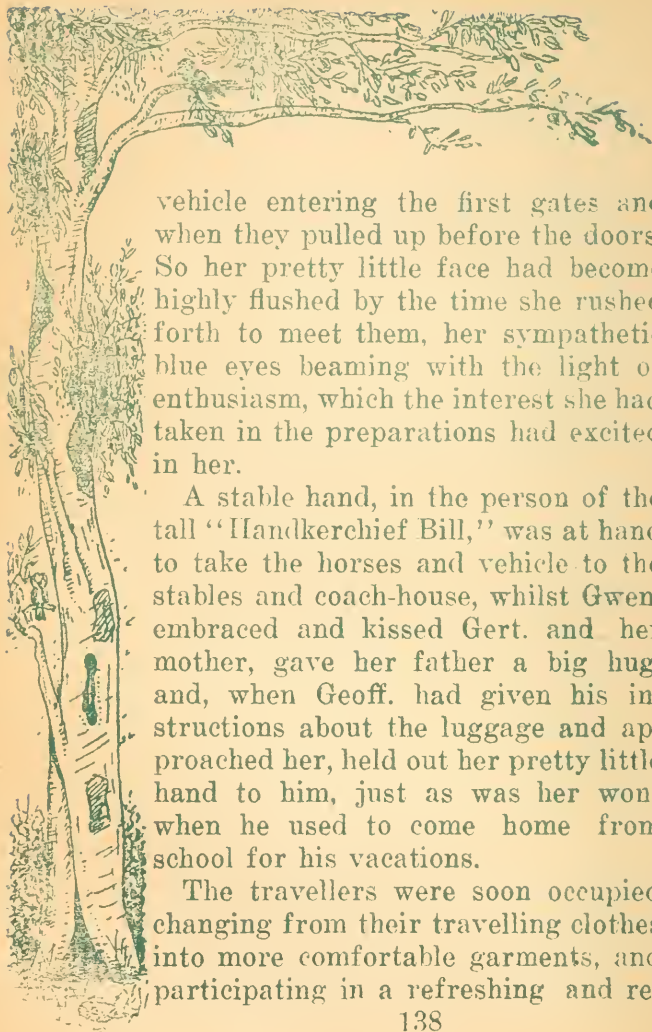
When all the preliminaries had been completed, the party of four packed their trunks and portmanteaux, and were soon being carried in comfortable carriages along the iron road which made the distant sheep and cattle station seem not so far from civilisation as it really was. Had they been required to walk the distance by stages, as did the wandering



“tramps” with their “swags” on their backs, they would have opened their eyes in wonder. As it was, the train-travelling was voted tediously tiresome, and Mrs. Garland was so glad to transfer from the train to the trap which awaited them at their country railway station. But although it was a change, and the party could alight and walk the hills to save the horses, they were dog-tired by the time they turned into the “Merrillee” gates.

It was dusk when they arrived before the entrance hall of the dear old homestead, which was brightly lit up ready for their home coming, for Gwen. had come over from “Sabine” and tried to make the welcome as cheerful as possible for the bereaved ones.


She had been busy up till the last moment, and had got through a hundred and one little finishing touches between the time she had sighted the



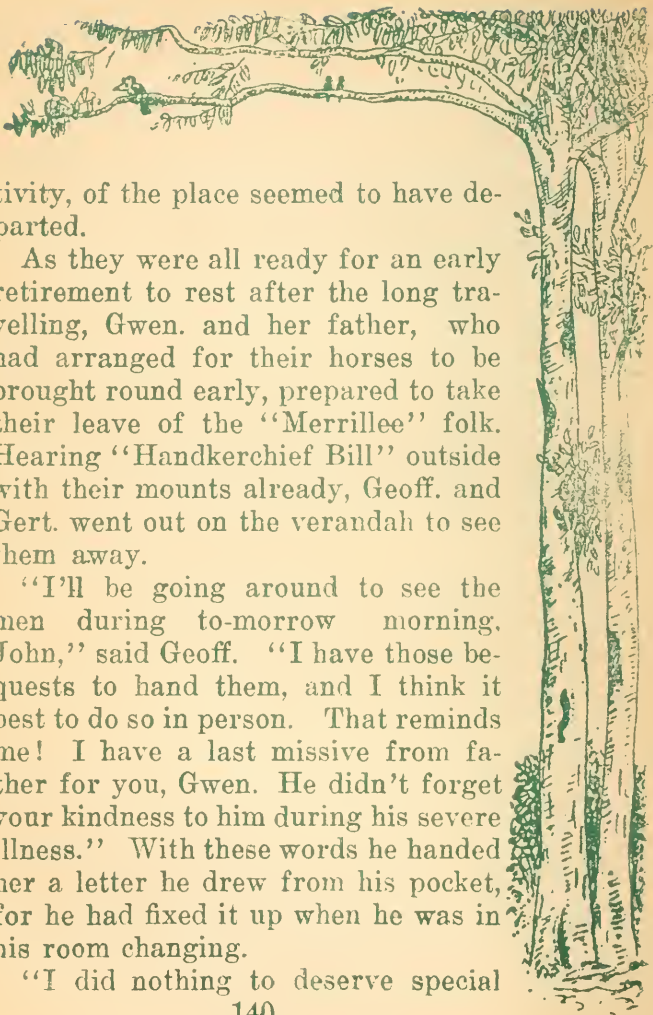
vehicle entering the first gates and when they pulled up before the doors. So her pretty little face had become highly flushed by the time she rushed forth to meet them, her sympathetic blue eyes beaming with the light of enthusiasm, which the interest she had taken in the preparations had excited in her.

A stable hand, in the person of the tall "Handkerchief Bill," was at hand to take the horses and vehicle to the stables and coach-house, whilst Gwen. embraced and kissed Gert. and her mother, gave her father a big hug, and, when Geoff. had given his instructions about the luggage and approached her, held out her pretty little hand to him, just as was her wont when he used to come home from school for his vacations.

The travellers were soon occupied changing from their travelling clothes into more comfortable garments, and participating in a refreshing and re-



creative toilet. The dinner gong soon followed, and, presently, the much revived party were seated around the large, massive-legged table in the dining hall, the daintily pretty decorations adding to the tastiness of the tempting viands. It was awkward to avoid re-awakening the grief of the family at the loss of their head, and Geoff. especially, for the others had been six weeks without him, missed the jovial father, whose place was now taken by himself. Gwen. did her best to prevent there being any lull, which would give them time to think, by her cheery chatter, and her father ably seconded her. He knew full well that the young master of "Merrilee" would spend many sad months whilst going over the same tracks, on the same excursions, and with the same objects as when his father used to be with him. The grand old man had so long been the soul of the station, that with him the life, the breath, the ac-

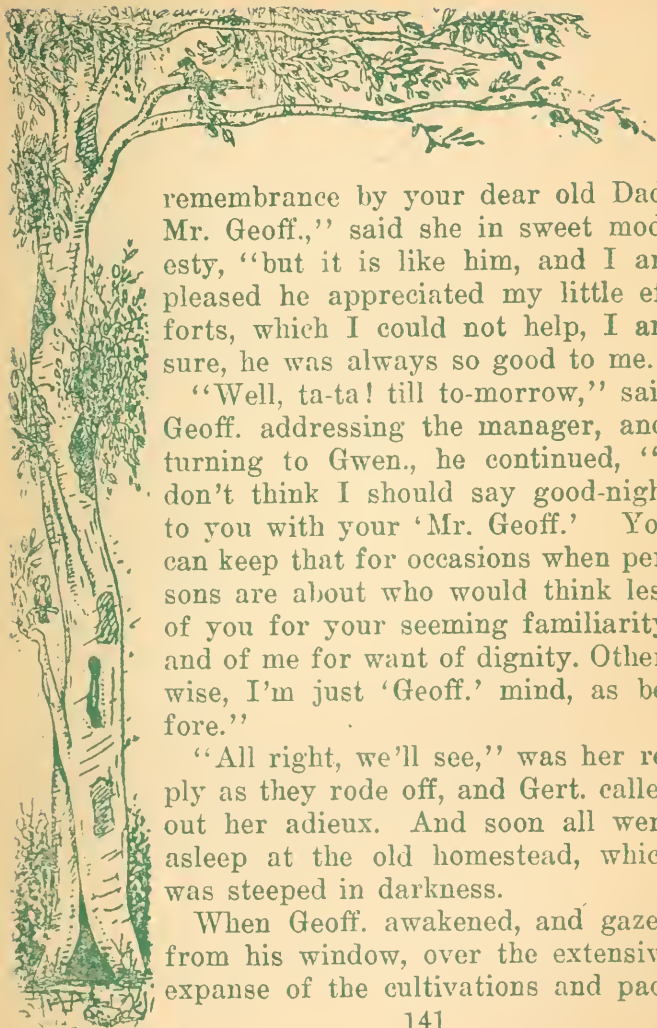


tivity, of the place seemed to have departed.

As they were all ready for an early retirement to rest after the long travelling, Gwen. and her father, who had arranged for their horses to be brought round early, prepared to take their leave of the "Merrillee" folk. Hearing "Handkerchief Bill" outside with their mounts already, Geoff. and Gert. went out on the verandah to see them away.

"I'll be going around to see the men during to-morrow morning. John," said Geoff. "I have those bequests to hand them, and I think it best to do so in person. That reminds me! I have a last missive from father for you, Gwen. He didn't forget your kindness to him during his severe illness." With these words he handed her a letter he drew from his pocket, for he had fixed it up when he was in his room changing.

"I did nothing to deserve special

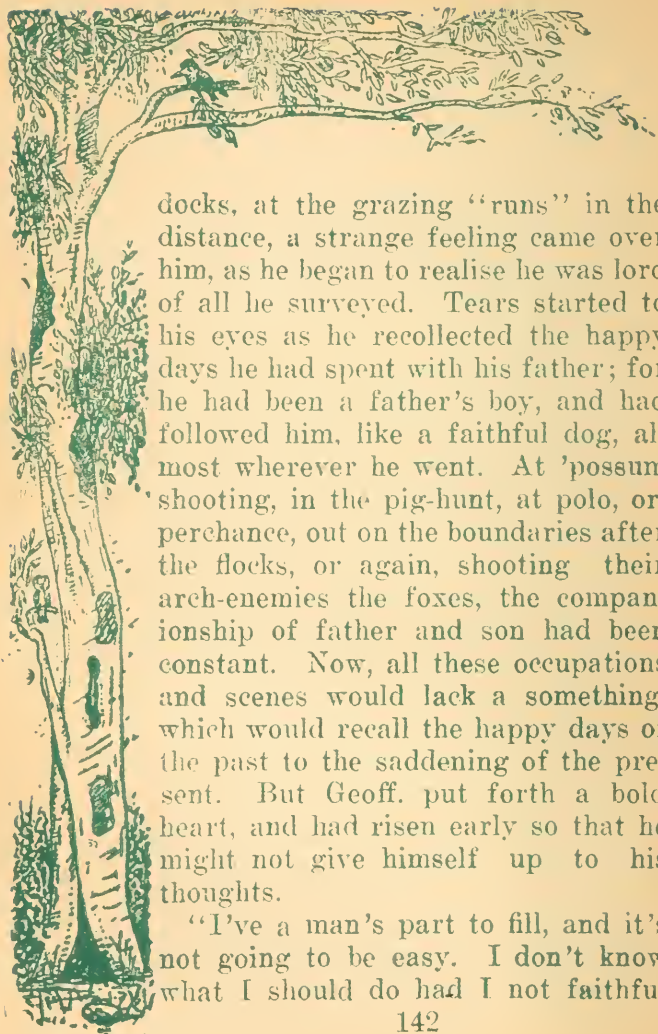


remembrance by your dear old Dad, Mr. Geoff.," said she in sweet modesty, "but it is like him, and I am pleased he appreciated my little efforts, which I could not help, I am sure, he was always so good to me."

"Well, ta-ta! till to-morrow," said Geoff. addressing the manager, and, turning to Gwen., he continued, "I don't think I should say good-night to you with your 'Mr. Geoff.' You can keep that for occasions when persons are about who would think less of you for your seeming familiarity, and of me for want of dignity. Otherwise, I'm just 'Geoff.' mind, as before."

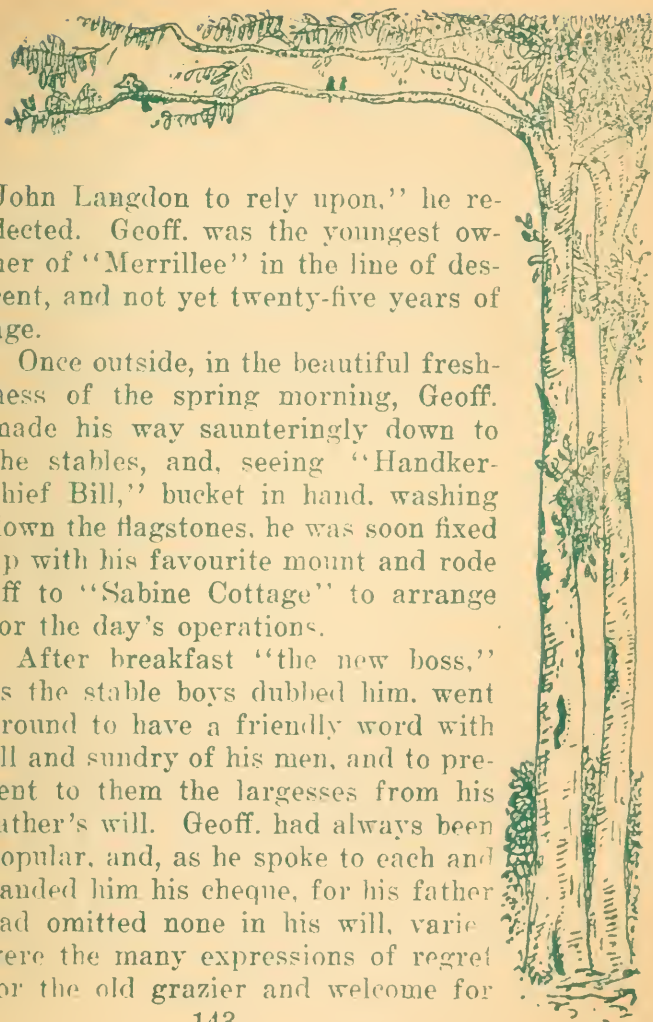
"All right, we'll see," was her reply as they rode off, and Gert. called out her adieux. And soon all were asleep at the old homestead, which was steeped in darkness.

When Geoff. awakened, and gazed from his window, over the extensive expanse of the cultivations and pad-



docks, at the grazing "runs" in the distance, a strange feeling came over him, as he began to realise he was lord of all he surveyed. Tears started to his eyes as he recollected the happy days he had spent with his father; for he had been a father's boy, and had followed him, like a faithful dog, almost wherever he went. At 'possum shooting, in the pig-hunt, at polo, or, perchance, out on the boundaries after the flocks, or again, shooting their arch-enemies the foxes, the companionship of father and son had been constant. Now, all these occupations and scenes would lack a something, which would recall the happy days of the past to the saddening of the present. But Geoff. put forth a bold heart, and had risen early so that he might not give himself up to his thoughts.

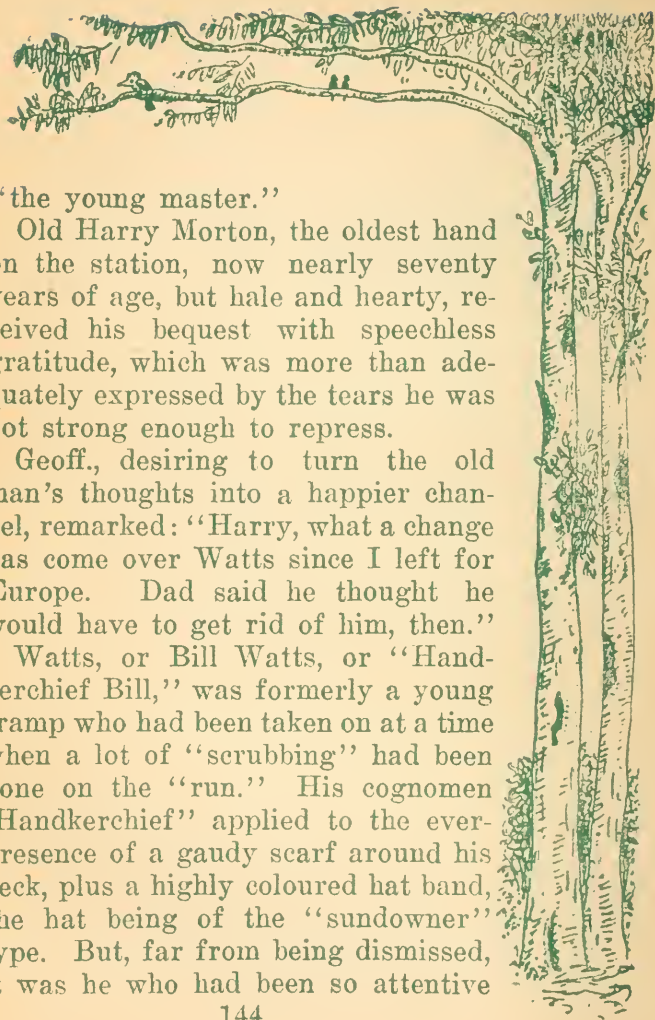
"I've a man's part to fill, and it's not going to be easy. I don't know what I should do had I not faithful



John Langdon to rely upon," he reflected. Geoff. was the youngest owner of "Merrillee" in the line of descent, and not yet twenty-five years of age.

Once outside, in the beautiful freshness of the spring morning, Geoff. made his way saunteringly down to the stables, and, seeing "Handkerchief Bill," bucket in hand, washing down the flagstones, he was soon fixed up with his favourite mount and rode off to "Sabine Cottage" to arrange for the day's operations.

After breakfast "the new boss," as the stable boys dubbed him, went around to have a friendly word with all and sundry of his men, and to present to them the largesses from his father's will. Geoff. had always been popular, and, as he spoke to each and handed him his cheque, for his father had omitted none in his will, varied were the many expressions of regret for the old grazier and welcome for

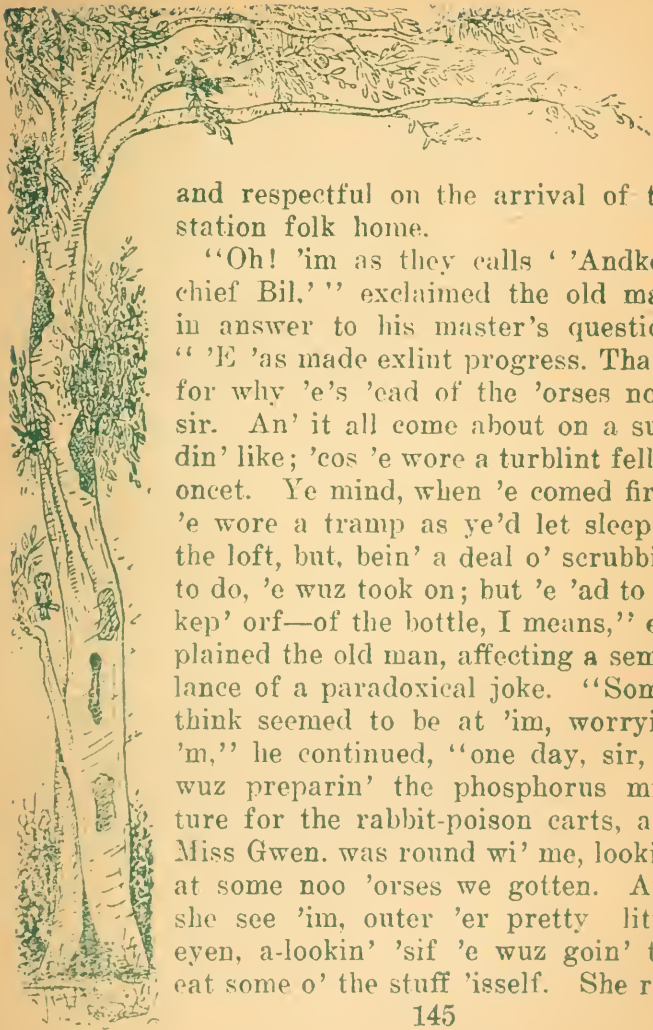


“the young master.”

Old Harry Morton, the oldest hand on the station, now nearly seventy years of age, but hale and hearty, received his bequest with speechless gratitude, which was more than adequately expressed by the tears he was not strong enough to repress.

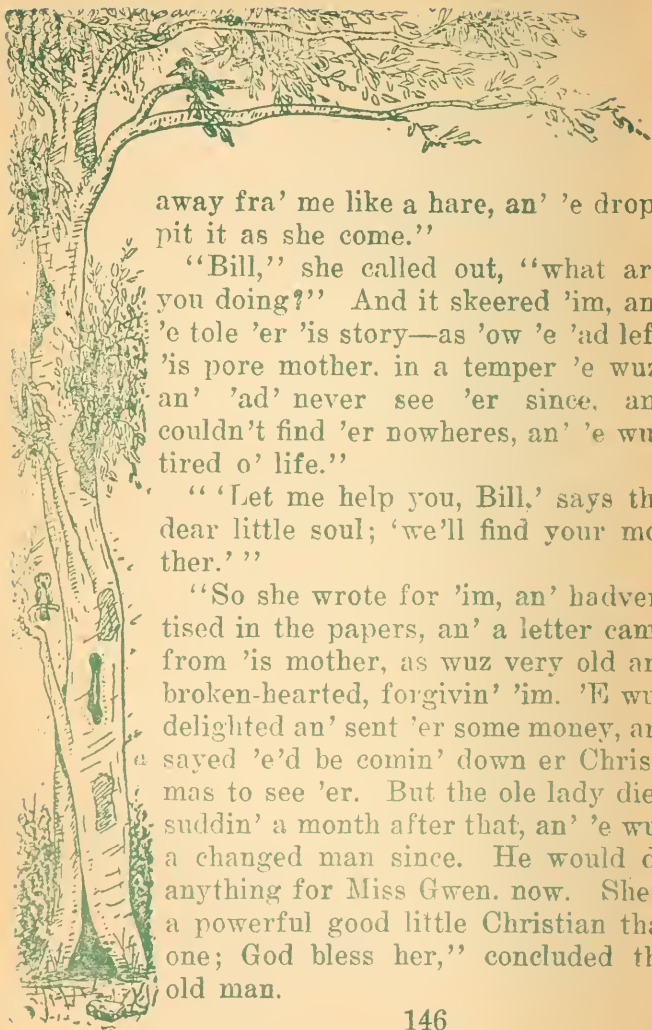
Geoff., desiring to turn the old man's thoughts into a happier channel, remarked: “Harry, what a change has come over Watts since I left for Europe. Dad said he thought he would have to get rid of him, then.”

Watts, or Bill Watts, or “Handkerchief Bill,” was formerly a young tramp who had been taken on at a time when a lot of “scrubbing” had been done on the “run.” His cognomen “Handkerchief” applied to the ever-presence of a gaudy scarf around his neck, plus a highly coloured hat band, the hat being of the “sundowner” type. But, far from being dismissed, it was he who had been so attentive



and respectful on the arrival of the station folk home.

“Oh! ’im as they calls ‘ ’Andkerchief Bil.’ ” exclaimed the old man, in answer to his master’s question. “ ’E ’as made exlint progress. That’s for why ’e’s ’ead of the ’orses now, sir. An’ it all come about on a sud-din’ like; ’cos ’e wore a turblint fellah oncet. Ye mind, when ’e comed first, ’e wore a tramp as ye’d let sleep i’ the loft, but, bein’ a deal o’ scrubbin’ to do, ’e wuz took on; but ’e ’ad to be kep’ orf—of the bottle, I means,” explained the old man, affecting a semblance of a paradoxical joke. “Some-think seemed to be at ’im, worryin’ ’m,” he continued, “one day, sir, ’e wuz preparin’ the phosphorus mixture for the rabbit-poison carts, and Miss Gwen. was round wi’ me, lookin’ at some noo ’orses we gotten. And she see ’im, outer ’er pretty little eyen, a-lookin’ ’sif ’e wuz goin’ ter eat some o’ the stuff ’isself. She run

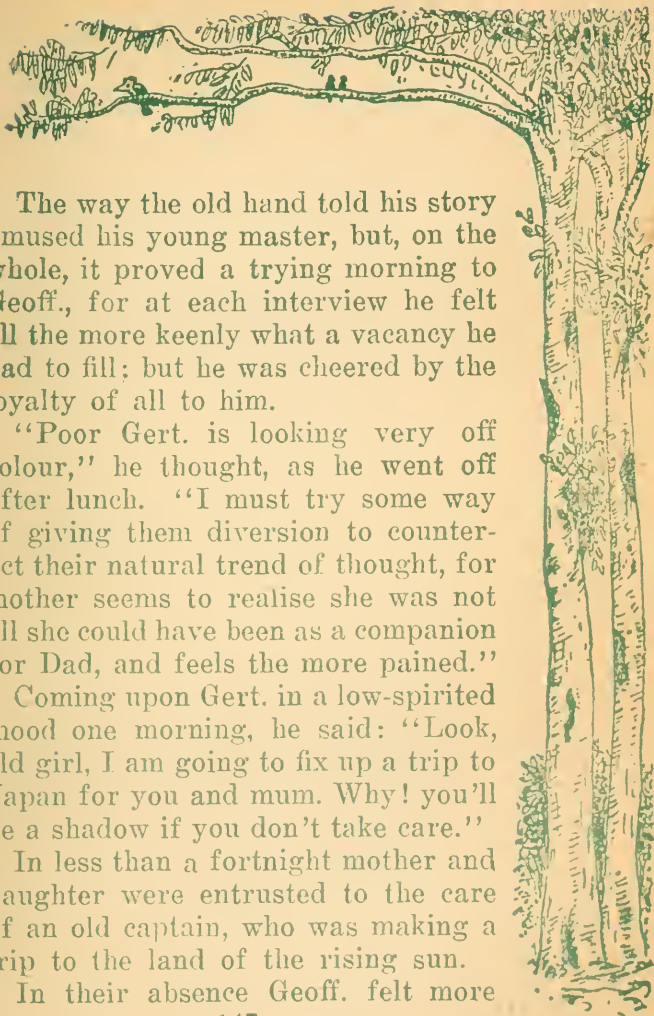


away fra' me like a hare, an' 'e drop-pit it as she come."

"Bill," she called out, "what are you doing?" And it skeered 'im, an' 'e tole 'er 'is story—as 'ow 'e 'ad left 'is pore mother. in a temper 'e wuz, an' 'ad' never see 'er since, an' couldn't find 'er nowheres, an' 'e wuz tired o' life."

" 'Let me help you, Bill,' says the dear little soul; 'we'll find your mother.' "

"So she wrote for 'im, an' hadver-tised in the papers, an' a letter came from 'is mother, as wuz very old an' broken-hearted, forgivin' 'im. 'E wuz delighted an' sent 'er some money, an' said 'e'd be comin' down er Christmas to see 'er. But the ole lady died suddin' a month after that, an' 'e wuz a changed man since. He would do anything for Miss Gwen. now. She's a powerful good little Christian that one; God bless her," concluded the old man.



The way the old hand told his story amused his young master, but, on the whole, it proved a trying morning to Geoff., for at each interview he felt all the more keenly what a vacancy he had to fill; but he was cheered by the loyalty of all to him.

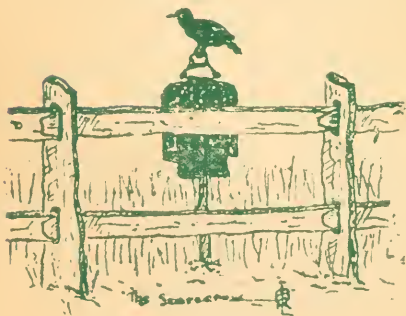
"Poor Gert. is looking very off colour," he thought, as he went off after lunch. "I must try some way of giving them diversion to counteract their natural trend of thought, for mother seems to realise she was not all she could have been as a companion for Dad, and feels the more pained."

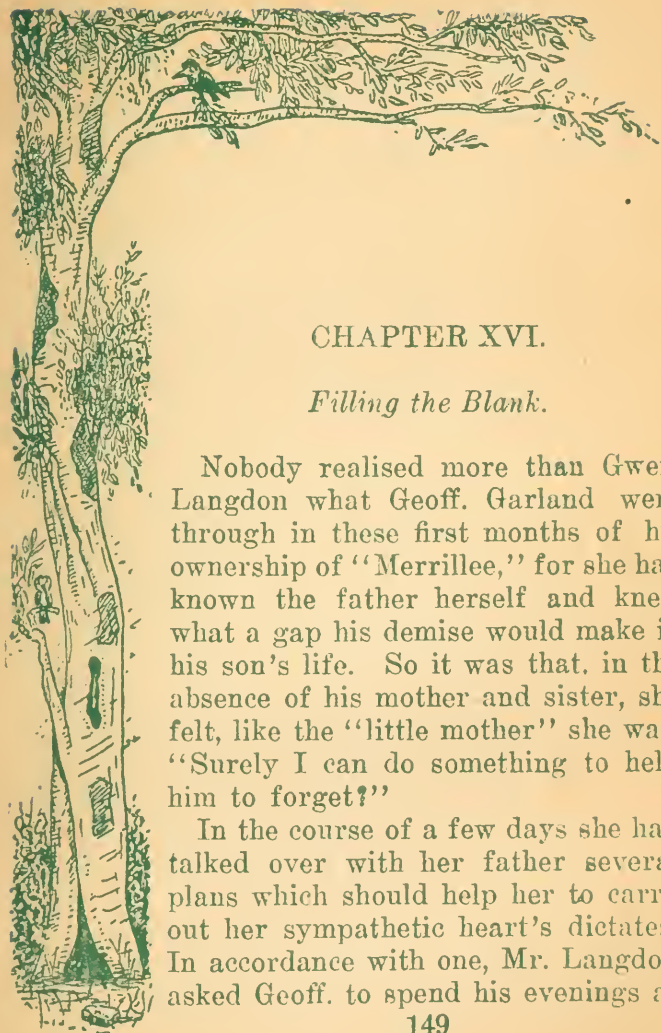
Coming upon Gert. in a low-spirited mood one morning, he said: "Look, old girl, I am going to fix up a trip to Japan for you and mum. Why! you'll be a shadow if you don't take care."

In less than a fortnight mother and daughter were entrusted to the care of an old captain, who was making a trip to the land of the rising sun.

In their absence Geoff. felt more

and more lonely, and undertook an almost equal share of the management of the station, so that his daily activities would keep his brain active and make him feel less the blank in his life caused by his father's death.



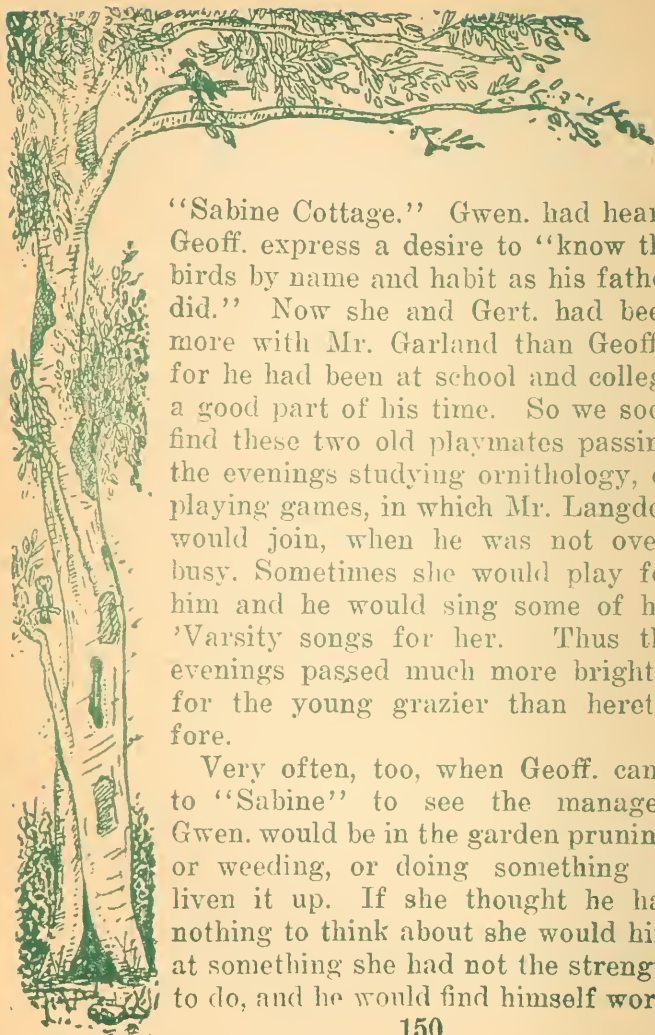


CHAPTER XVI.

Filling the Blank.

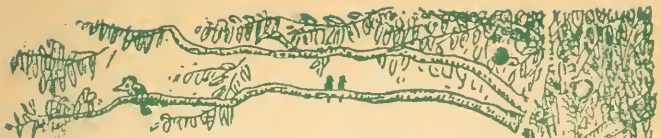
Nobody realised more than Gwen. Langdon what Geoff. Garland went through in these first months of his ownership of "Merrillee," for she had known the father herself and knew what a gap his demise would make in his son's life. So it was that, in the absence of his mother and sister, she felt, like the "little mother" she was, "Surely I can do something to help him to forget?"

In the course of a few days she had talked over with her father several plans which should help her to carry out her sympathetic heart's dictates. In accordance with one, Mr. Langdon asked Geoff. to spend his evenings at



"Sabine Cottage." Gwen. had heard Geoff. express a desire to "know the birds by name and habit as his father did." Now she and Gert. had been more with Mr. Garland than Geoff.; for he had been at school and college a good part of his time. So we soon find these two old playmates passing the evenings studying ornithology, or playing games, in which Mr. Langdon would join, when he was not over-busy. Sometimes she would play for him and he would sing some of his 'Varsity songs for her. Thus the evenings passed much more brightly for the young grazier than heretofore.

Very often, too, when Geoff. came to "Sabine" to see the manager, Gwen. would be in the garden pruning, or weeding, or doing something to liven it up. If she thought he had nothing to think about she would hint at something she had not the strength to do, and he would find himself work-

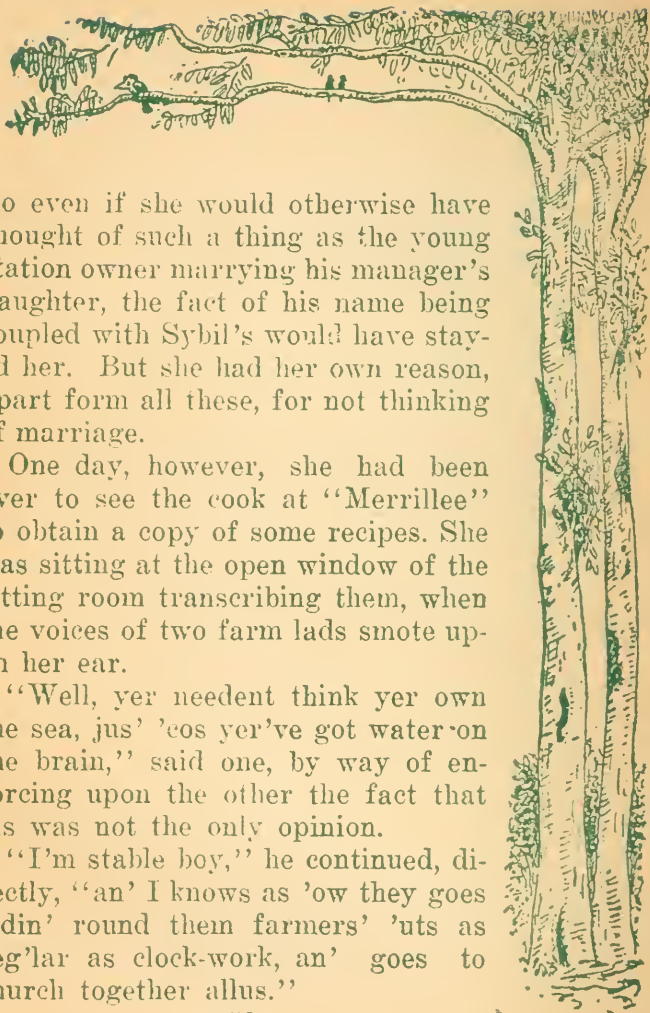


ing with her and forgetting all else.

"Oh! it's not what I'd like to be, but there's so much that a girl cannot do," she would say, with the above result.

It was thus she acted in all her occupations. She won his interest in the work, and he forgot himself in what he was doing. Sometimes, he would go with her on her "rounds." It did him good to see the pleasure she derived from her visitations to the share farmer folk.

Amidst all these kindnesses, which she performed purely to help him fill the blank in his existence, Gwen. had not thought of her personal gain. There was not the faintest idea in her good little head that she could win Geoff. Garland's love and become his wife, if she would. And marriage had not entered into her calculations as yet. Besides, she knew nothing about Sybil's engagement to Ralph—that had been kept quiet as Ralph asked.

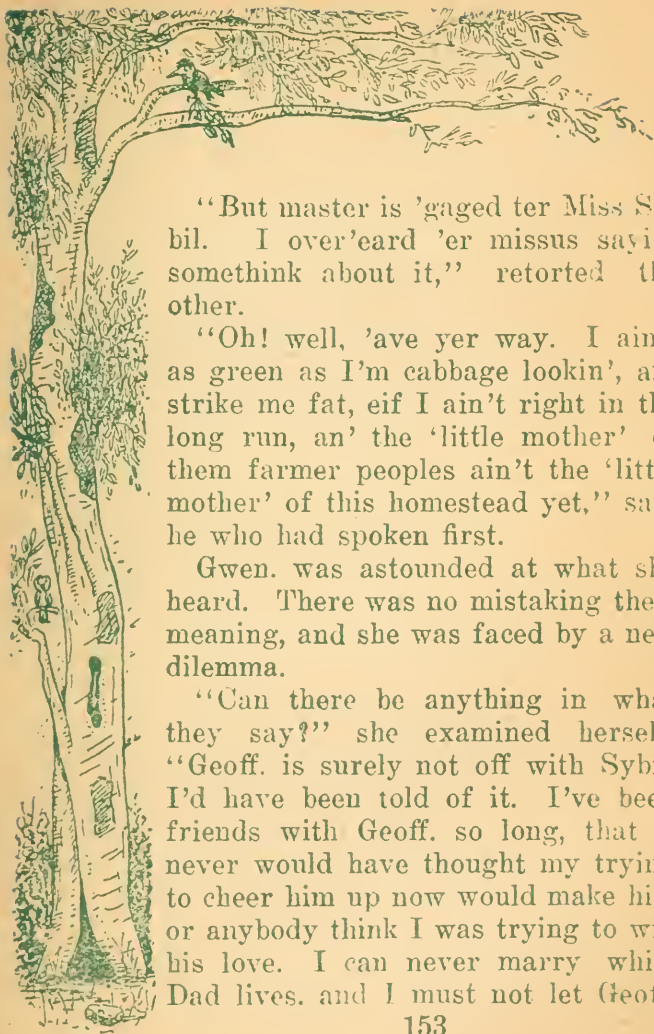


So even if she would otherwise have thought of such a thing as the young station owner marrying his manager's daughter, the fact of his name being coupled with Sybil's would have stayed her. But she had her own reason, apart from all these, for not thinking of marriage.

One day, however, she had been over to see the cook at "Merrilee" to obtain a copy of some recipes. She was sitting at the open window of the sitting room transcribing them, when the voices of two farm lads smote upon her ear.

"Well, yer needent think yer own the sea, jus' 'cos yer've got water on the brain," said one, by way of enforcing upon the other the fact that his was not the only opinion.

"I'm stable boy," he continued, directly, "an' I knows as 'ow they goes ridin' round them farmers' 'uts as reg'lar as clock-work, an' goes to church together allus."

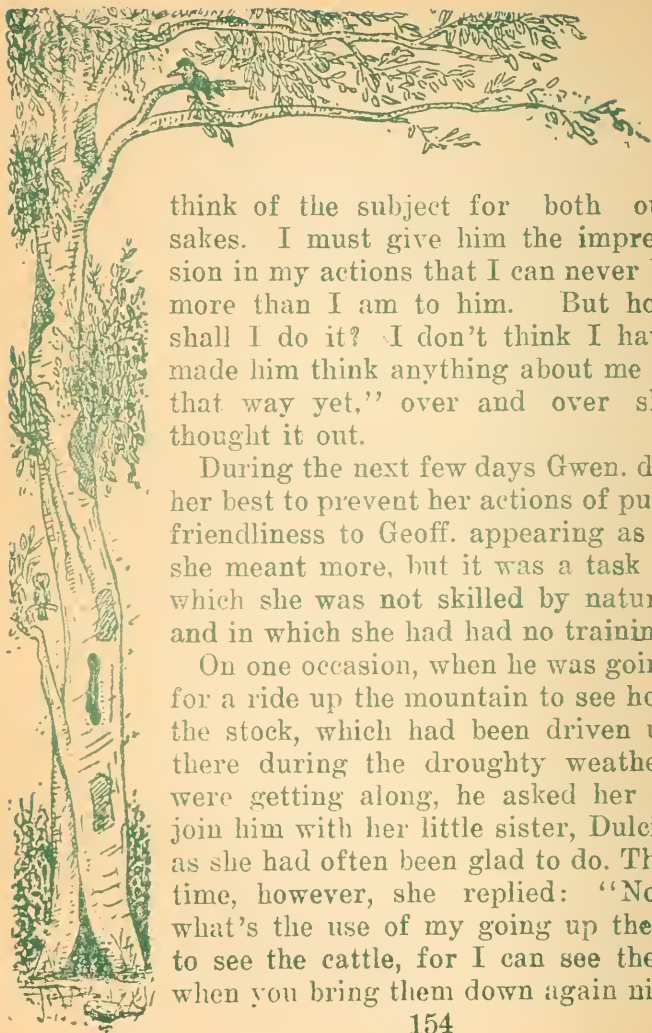


"But master is 'gaged ter Miss Sybil. I over'eard 'er missus sayin' somethink about it," retorted the other.

"Oh! well, 'ave yer way. I ain't as green as I'm cabbage lookin', an' strike me fat, eif I ain't right in the long run, an' the 'little mother' of them farmer peoples ain't the 'little mother' of this homestead yet," said he who had spoken first.

Gwen. was astounded at what she heard. There was no mistaking their meaning, and she was faced by a new dilemma.

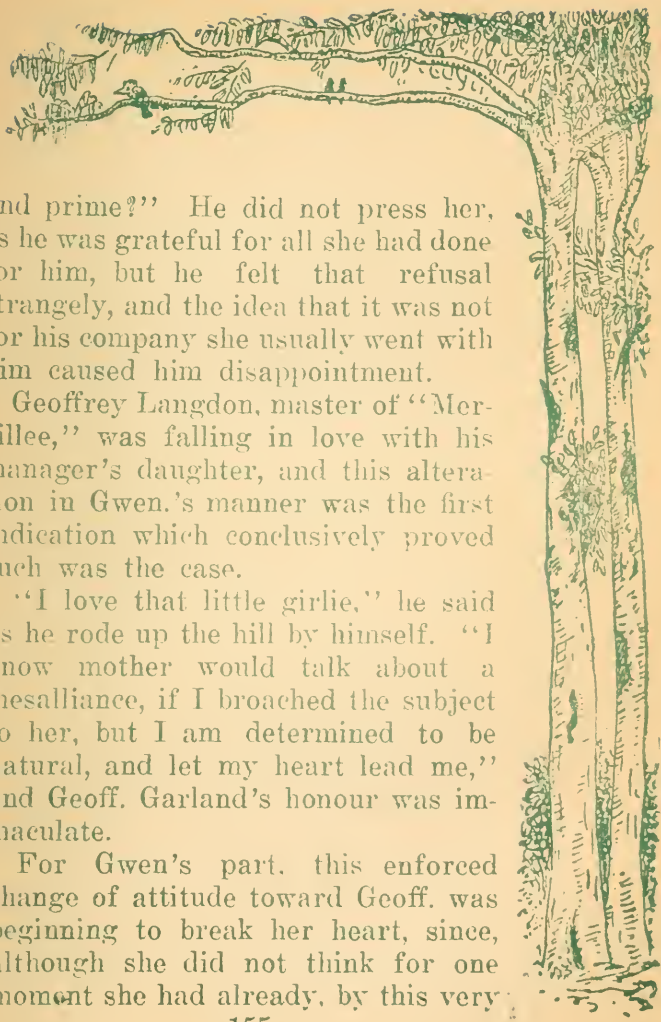
"Can there be anything in what they say?" she examined herself. "Geoff. is surely not off with Sybil. I'd have been told of it. I've been friends with Geoff. so long, that I never would have thought my trying to cheer him up now would make him or anybody think I was trying to win his love. I can never marry while Dad lives. and I must not let Geoff.



think of the subject for both our sakes. I must give him the impression in my actions that I can never be more than I am to him. But how shall I do it? I don't think I have made him think anything about me in that way yet," over and over she thought it out.

During the next few days Gwen. did her best to prevent her actions of pure friendliness to Geoff. appearing as if she meant more, but it was a task in which she was not skilled by nature and in which she had had no training.

On one occasion, when he was going for a ride up the mountain to see how the stock, which had been driven up there during the drougthy weather, were getting along, he asked her to join him with her little sister, Dulcie, as she had often been glad to do. This time, however, she replied: "Now what's the use of my going up there to see the cattle, for I can see them when you bring them down again nice

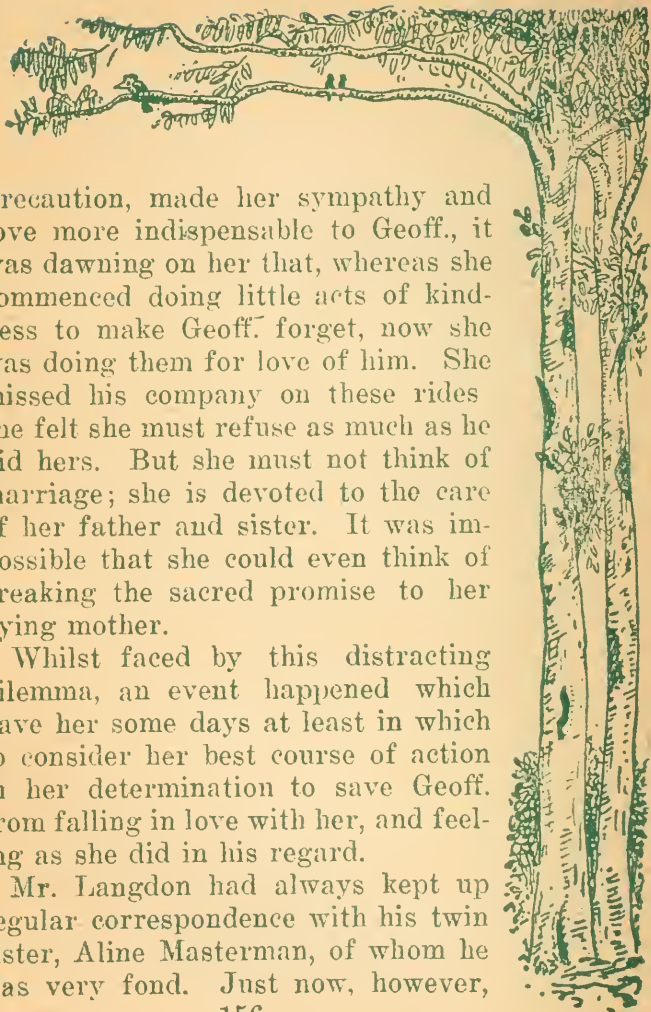


and prime?" He did not press her, as he was grateful for all she had done for him, but he felt that refusal strangely, and the idea that it was not for his company she usually went with him caused him disappointment.

Geoffrey Langdon, master of "Merrilee," was falling in love with his manager's daughter, and this alteration in Gwen's manner was the first indication which conclusively proved such was the case.

"I love that little girlie," he said as he rode up the hill by himself. "I know mother would talk about a mesalliance, if I broached the subject to her, but I am determined to be natural, and let my heart lead me," and Geoff. Garland's honour was immaculate.

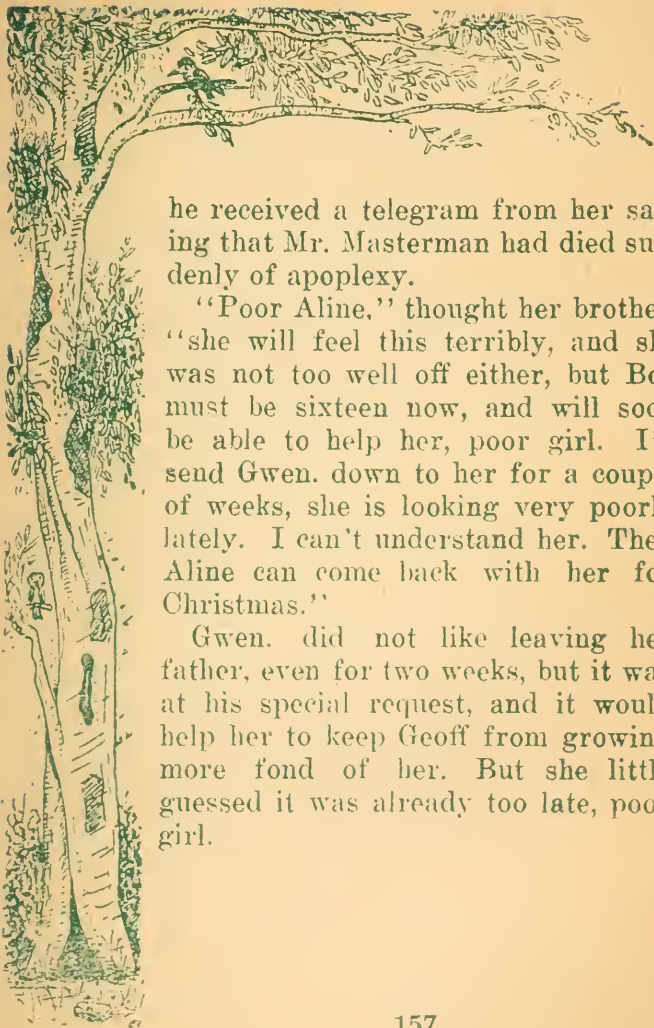
For Gwen's part, this enforced change of attitude toward Geoff. was beginning to break her heart, since, although she did not think for one moment she had already, by this very



precaution, made her sympathy and love more indispensable to Geoff., it was dawning on her that, whereas she commenced doing little acts of kindness to make Geoff. forget, now she was doing them for love of him. She missed his company on these rides she felt she must refuse as much as he did hers. But she must not think of marriage; she is devoted to the care of her father and sister. It was impossible that she could even think of breaking the sacred promise to her dying mother.

Whilst faced by this distracting dilemma, an event happened which gave her some days at least in which to consider her best course of action in her determination to save Geoff. from falling in love with her, and feeling as she did in his regard.

Mr. Langdon had always kept up regular correspondence with his twin sister, Aline Masterman, of whom he was very fond. Just now, however,



he received a telegram from her saying that Mr. Masterman had died suddenly of apoplexy.

"Poor Aline," thought her brother, "she will feel this terribly, and she was not too well off either, but Bob must be sixteen now, and will soon be able to help her, poor girl. I'll send Gwen. down to her for a couple of weeks, she is looking very poorly lately. I can't understand her. Then Aline can come back with her for Christmas."

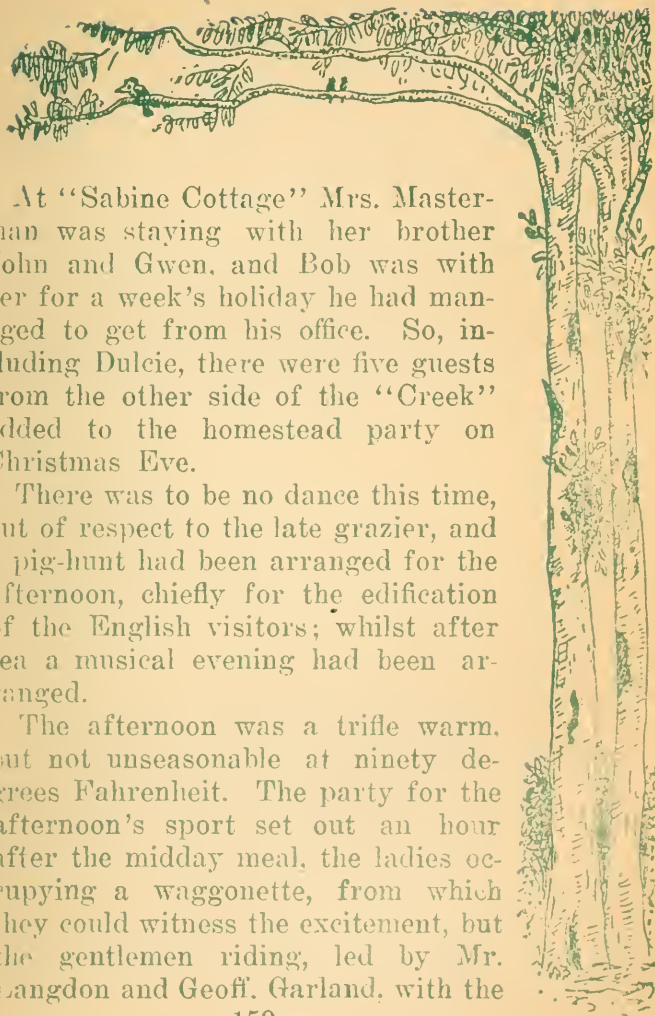
Gwen. did not like leaving her father, even for two weeks, but it was at his special request, and it would help her to keep Geoff from growing more fond of her. But she little guessed it was already too late, poor girl.



CHAPTER XVII.

Keeping a Promise.

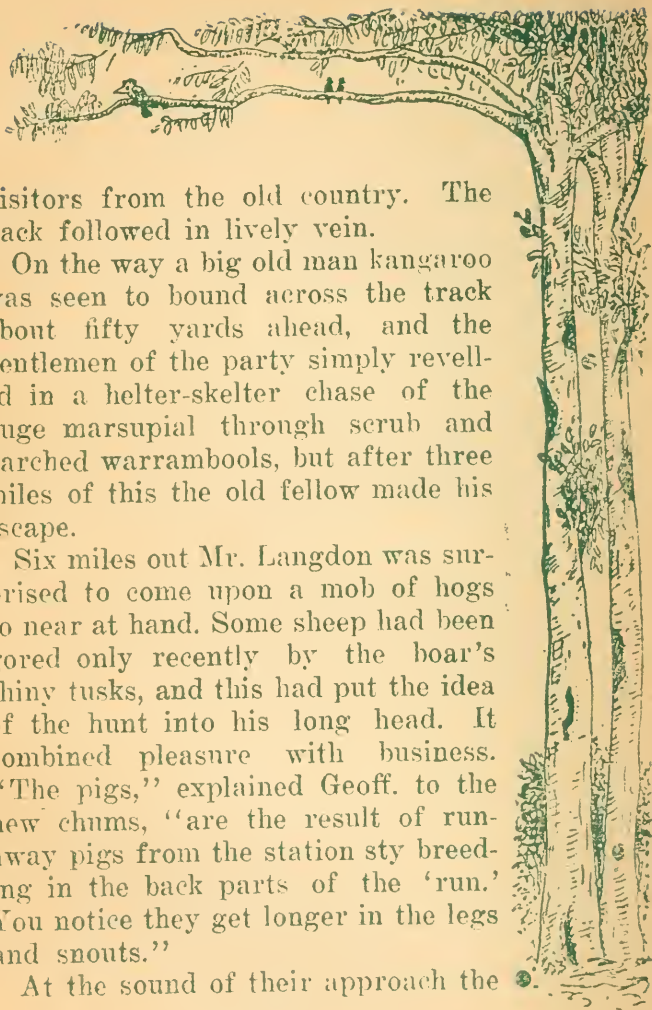
It was Christmas week, and there was a full complement of visitors at "Merrillee," for Mr. and Mrs. Roslyn and Ralph, Mr. and Mrs. Saddington and Sybil, and some English gentlemen, were the guests of the station folk, Mrs. Garland and Gert. having just returned from their trip to Japan, which had proved a great pick-me-up for the mother and daughter. This Christmas party had a special signification, for at it was to be announced the engagement of Ralph and Sybil, which had been known only to the Saddington and Roslyn families and to Geoff. Garland.



At "Sabine Cottage" Mrs. Masterman was staying with her brother John and Gwen, and Bob was with her for a week's holiday he had managed to get from his office. So, including Dulcie, there were five guests from the other side of the "Creek" added to the homestead party on Christmas Eve.

There was to be no dance this time, out of respect to the late grazier, and a pig-hunt had been arranged for the afternoon, chiefly for the edification of the English visitors; whilst after tea a musical evening had been arranged.

The afternoon was a trifle warm, but not unseasonable at ninety degrees Fahrenheit. The party for the afternoon's sport set out an hour after the midday meal, the ladies occupying a waggonette, from which they could witness the excitement, but the gentlemen riding, led by Mr. Langdon and Geoff. Garland, with the

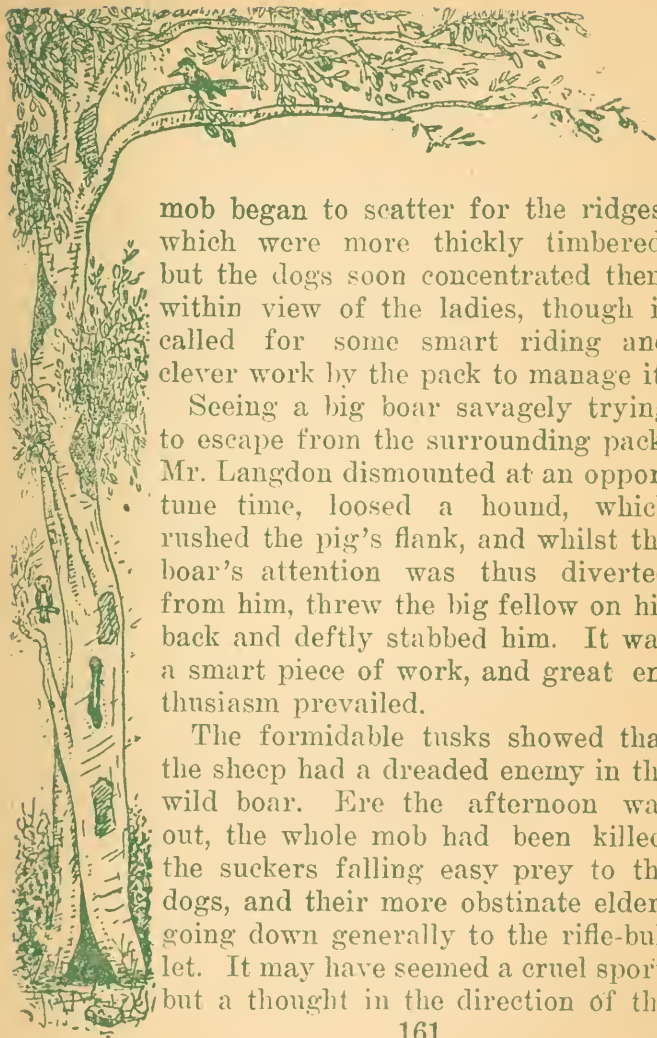


visitors from the old country. The pack followed in lively vein.

On the way a big old man kangaroo was seen to bound across the track about fifty yards ahead, and the gentlemen of the party simply revelled in a helter-skelter chase of the huge marsupial through scrub and parched warrambools, but after three miles of this the old fellow made his escape.

Six miles out Mr. Langdon was surprised to come upon a mob of hogs so near at hand. Some sheep had been gored only recently by the boar's shiny tusks, and this had put the idea of the hunt into his long head. It combined pleasure with business. "The pigs," explained Geoff. to the new chums, "are the result of runaway pigs from the station sty breeding in the back parts of the 'run.' You notice they get longer in the legs and snouts."

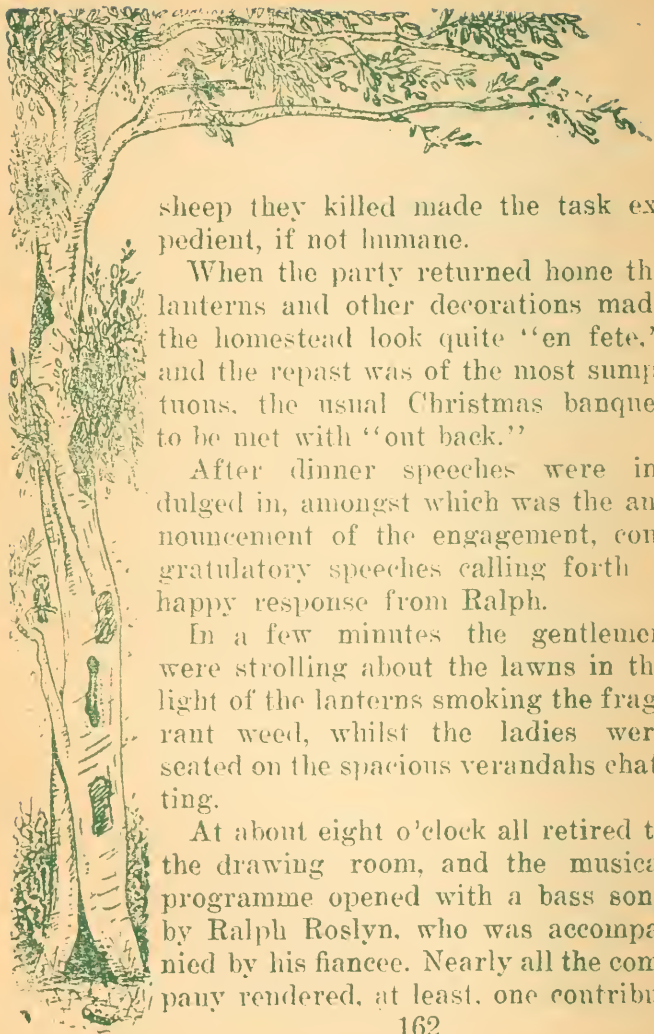
At the sound of their approach the



mob began to scatter for the ridges, which were more thickly timbered, but the dogs soon concentrated them within view of the ladies, though it called for some smart riding and clever work by the pack to manage it.

Seeing a big boar savagely trying to escape from the surrounding pack, Mr. Langdon dismounted at an opportune time, loosed a hound, which rushed the pig's flank, and whilst the boar's attention was thus diverted from him, threw the big fellow on his back and deftly stabbed him. It was a smart piece of work, and great enthusiasm prevailed.

The formidable tusks showed that the sheep had a dreaded enemy in the wild boar. Ere the afternoon was out, the whole mob had been killed, the suckers falling easy prey to the dogs, and their more obstinate elders going down generally to the rifle-bullet. It may have seemed a cruel sport, but a thought in the direction of the



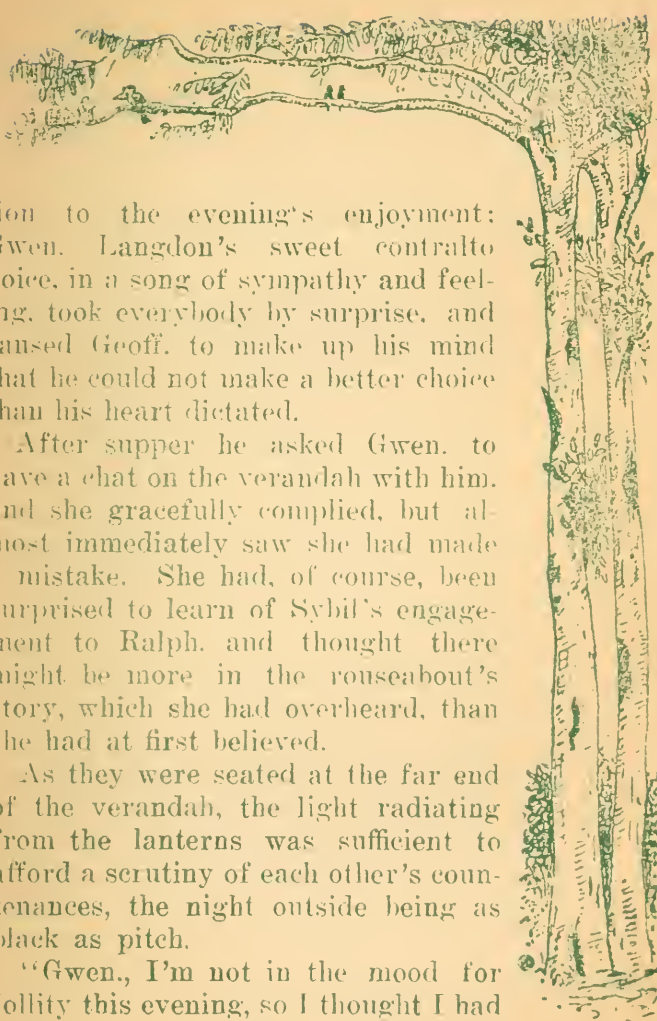
sheep they killed made the task expedient, if not humane.

When the party returned home the lanterns and other decorations made the homestead look quite "en fete," and the repast was of the most sumptuous, the usual Christmas banquet to be met with "out back."

After dinner speeches were indulged in, amongst which was the announcement of the engagement, congratulatory speeches calling forth a happy response from Ralph.

In a few minutes the gentlemen were strolling about the lawns in the light of the lanterns smoking the fragrant weed, whilst the ladies were seated on the spacious verandahs chatting.

At about eight o'clock all retired to the drawing room, and the musical programme opened with a bass song by Ralph Roslyn, who was accompanied by his fiancée. Nearly all the company rendered, at least, one contribu-



tion to the evening's enjoyment: Gwen. Langdon's sweet contralto voice, in a song of sympathy and feeling, took everybody by surprise, and caused Geoff. to make up his mind that he could not make a better choice than his heart dictated.

After supper he asked Gwen. to have a chat on the verandah with him, and she gracefully complied, but almost immediately saw she had made a mistake. She had, of course, been surprised to learn of Sybil's engagement to Ralph, and thought there might be more in the rouseabout's story, which she had overheard, than she had at first believed.

As they were seated at the far end of the verandah, the light radiating from the lanterns was sufficient to afford a scrutiny of each other's countenances, the night outside being as black as pitch.

"Gwen., I'm not in the mood for jollity this evening, so I thought I had

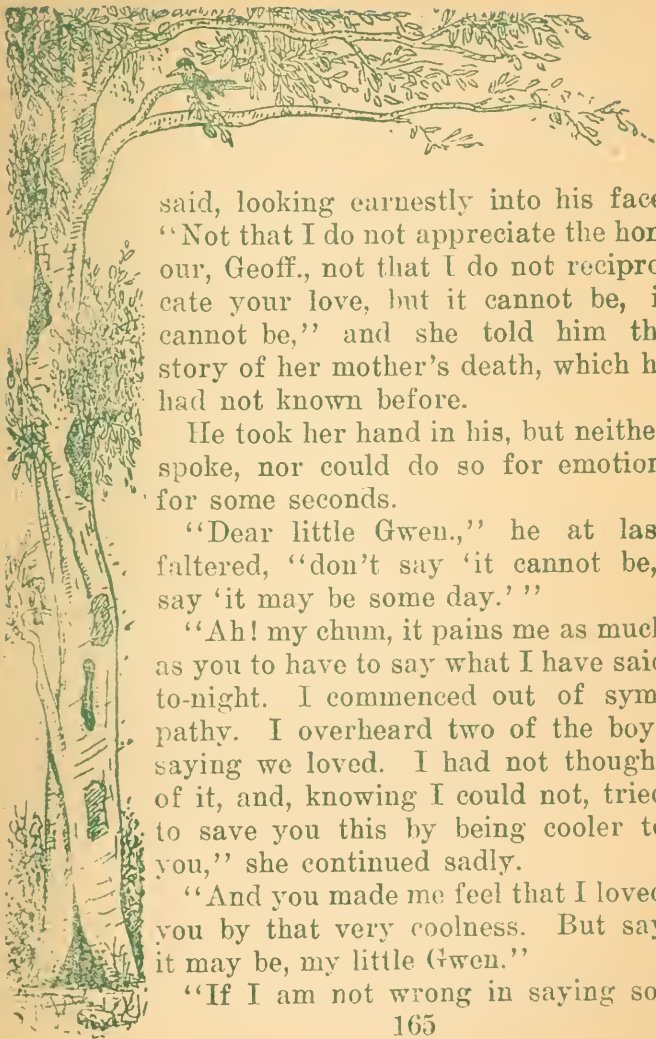


better come out here and have a quiet talk with my old playmate, who has been such a comfort to me of late."

"I have tried out of sympathy for you, Geoff., to make you forget your troubles, and if I have eased your mind at any time, I am glad I did so, for that was my pure motive," she ventured, to try to stop what she felt was inevitable, "but let us talk of others, Geoff."

"Yes, I know you have done all you could for me out of sympathy, Gwen.," he answered, ignoring the last words she uttered, "but I have been longing for you to do so for love of your old chum. I have tried to be content with sympathy, but it is not that alone that my heart longs for. I have put my mind harder and harder to work, but when I come home I need the sympathy of a 'Little Mother' all my own."

"Ah! my dear Geoff., it breaks my heart to hear you speak thus," she



said, looking earnestly into his face. "Not that I do not appreciate the honour, Geoff., not that I do not reciprocate your love, but it cannot be, it cannot be," and she told him the story of her mother's death, which he had not known before.

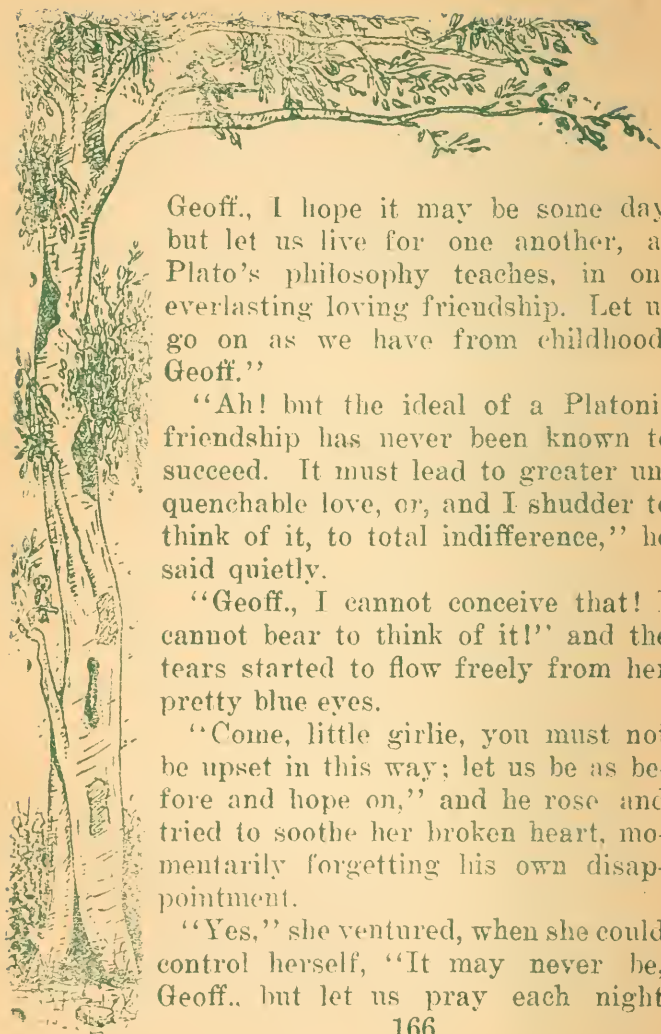
He took her hand in his, but neither spoke, nor could do so for emotion, for some seconds.

"Dear little Gwen.," he at last faltered, "don't say 'it cannot be,' say 'it may be some day.'"

"Ah! my chum, it pains me as much as you to have to say what I have said to-night. I commenced out of sympathy. I overheard two of the boys saying we loved. I had not thought of it, and, knowing I could not, tried to save you this by being cooler to you," she continued sadly.

"And you made me feel that I loved you by that very coolness. But say it may be, my little Gwen."

"If I am not wrong in saying so,



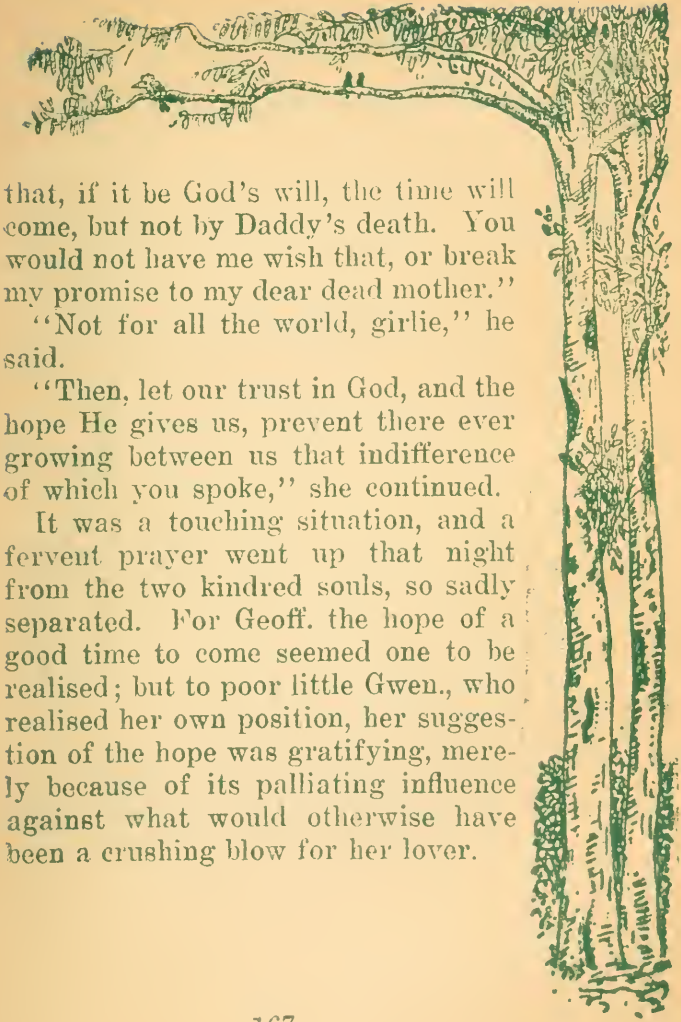
Geoff., I hope it may be some day, but let us live for one another, as Plato's philosophy teaches, in one everlasting loving friendship. Let us go on as we have from childhood, Geoff."

"Ah! but the ideal of a Platonic friendship has never been known to succeed. It must lead to greater unquenchable love, or, and I shudder to think of it, to total indifference," he said quietly.

"Geoff., I cannot conceive that! I cannot bear to think of it!" and the tears started to flow freely from her pretty blue eyes.

"Come, little girlie, you must not be upset in this way; let us be as before and hope on," and he rose and tried to soothe her broken heart, momentarily forgetting his own disappointment.

"Yes," she ventured, when she could control herself, "It may never be, Geoff., but let us pray each night

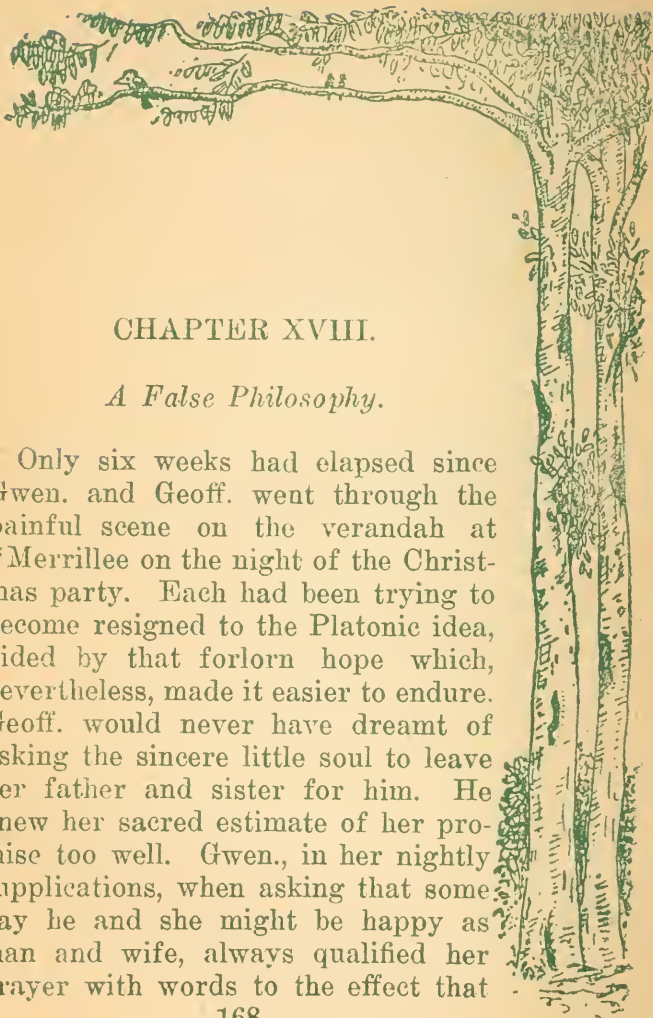


that, if it be God's will, the time will come, but not by Daddy's death. You would not have me wish that, or break my promise to my dear dead mother."

"Not for all the world, girlie," he said.

"Then, let our trust in God, and the hope He gives us, prevent there ever growing between us that indifference of which you spoke," she continued.

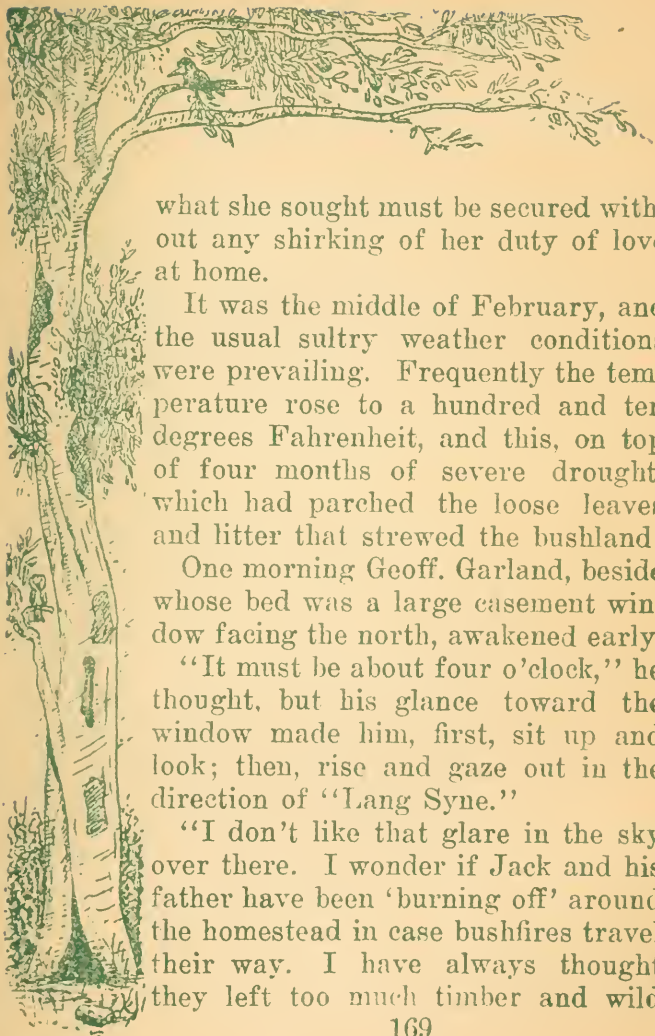
It was a touching situation, and a fervent prayer went up that night from the two kindred souls, so sadly separated. For Geoff. the hope of a good time to come seemed one to be realised; but to poor little Gwen., who realised her own position, her suggestion of the hope was gratifying, merely because of its palliating influence against what would otherwise have been a crushing blow for her lover.



CHAPTER XVIII.

A False Philosophy.

Only six weeks had elapsed since Gwen. and Geoff. went through the painful scene on the verandah at "Merrillee on the night of the Christmas party. Each had been trying to become resigned to the Platonic idea, aided by that forlorn hope which, nevertheless, made it easier to endure. Geoff. would never have dreamt of asking the sincere little soul to leave her father and sister for him. He knew her sacred estimate of her promise too well. Gwen., in her nightly supplications, when asking that some day he and she might be happy as man and wife, always qualified her prayer with words to the effect that



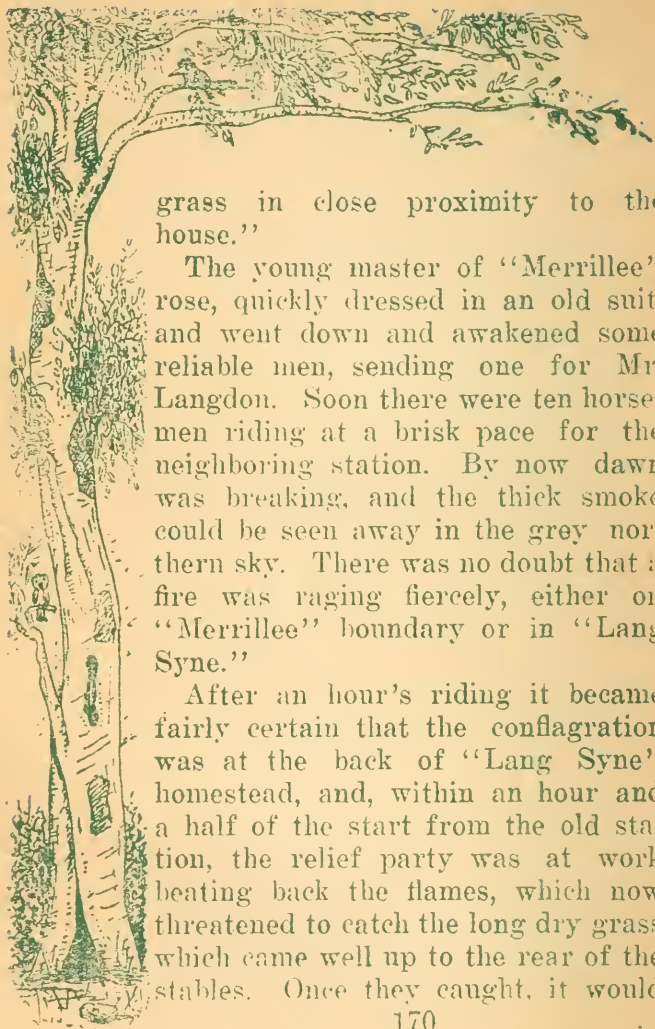
what she sought must be secured without any shirking of her duty of love at home.

It was the middle of February, and the usual sultry weather conditions were prevailing. Frequently the temperature rose to a hundred and ten degrees Fahrenheit, and this, on top of four months of severe drought, which had parched the loose leaves and litter that strewed the bushland!

One morning Geoff. Garland, beside whose bed was a large casement window facing the north, awakened early.

"It must be about four o'clock," he thought, but his glance toward the window made him, first, sit up and look; then, rise and gaze out in the direction of "Lang Syne."

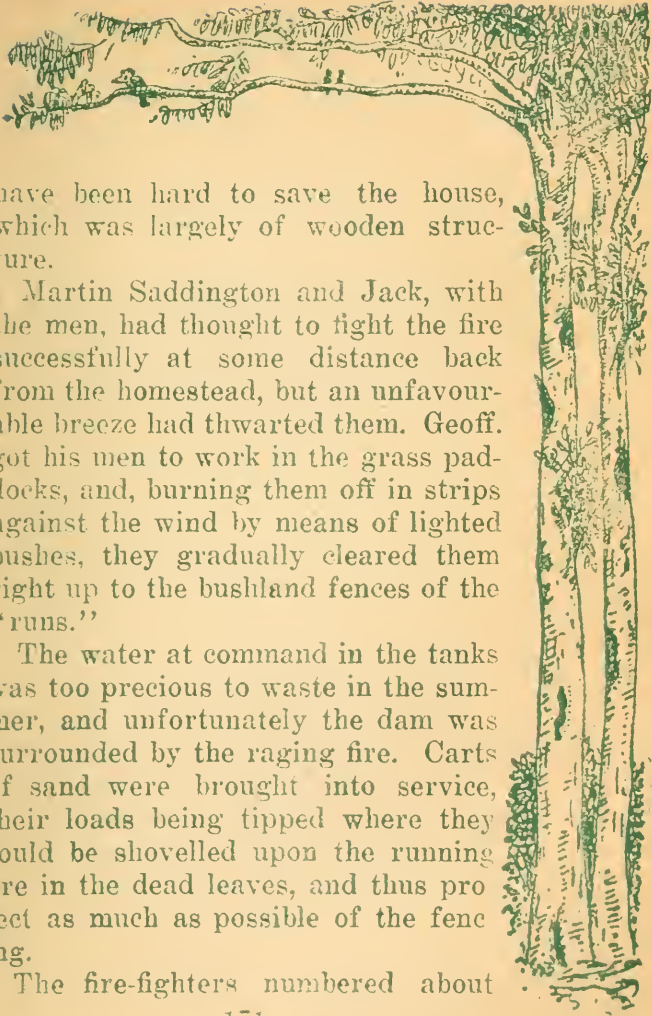
"I don't like that glare in the sky over there. I wonder if Jack and his father have been 'burning off' around the homestead in case bushfires travel their way. I have always thought they left too much timber and wild



grass in close proximity to the house."

The young master of "Merrillee" rose, quickly dressed in an old suit, and went down and awakened some reliable men, sending one for Mr. Langdon. Soon there were ten horsemen riding at a brisk pace for the neighboring station. By now dawn was breaking, and the thick smoke could be seen away in the grey northern sky. There was no doubt that a fire was raging fiercely, either on "Merrillee" boundary or in "Lang Syne."

After an hour's riding it became fairly certain that the conflagration was at the back of "Lang Syne" homestead, and, within an hour and a half of the start from the old station, the relief party was at work beating back the flames, which now threatened to catch the long dry grass which came well up to the rear of the stables. Once they caught, it would

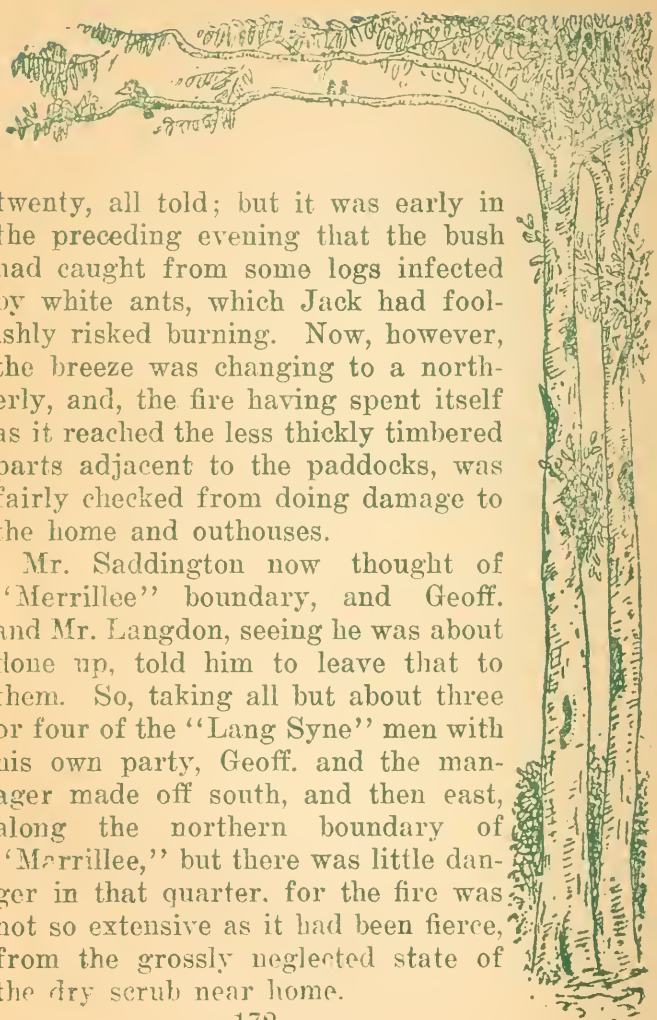


have been hard to save the house, which was largely of wooden structure.

Martin Saddington and Jack, with the men, had thought to fight the fire successfully at some distance back from the homestead, but an unfavourable breeze had thwarted them. Geoff. got his men to work in the grass paddocks, and, burning them off in strips against the wind by means of lighted bushes, they gradually cleared them right up to the bushland fences of the "runs."

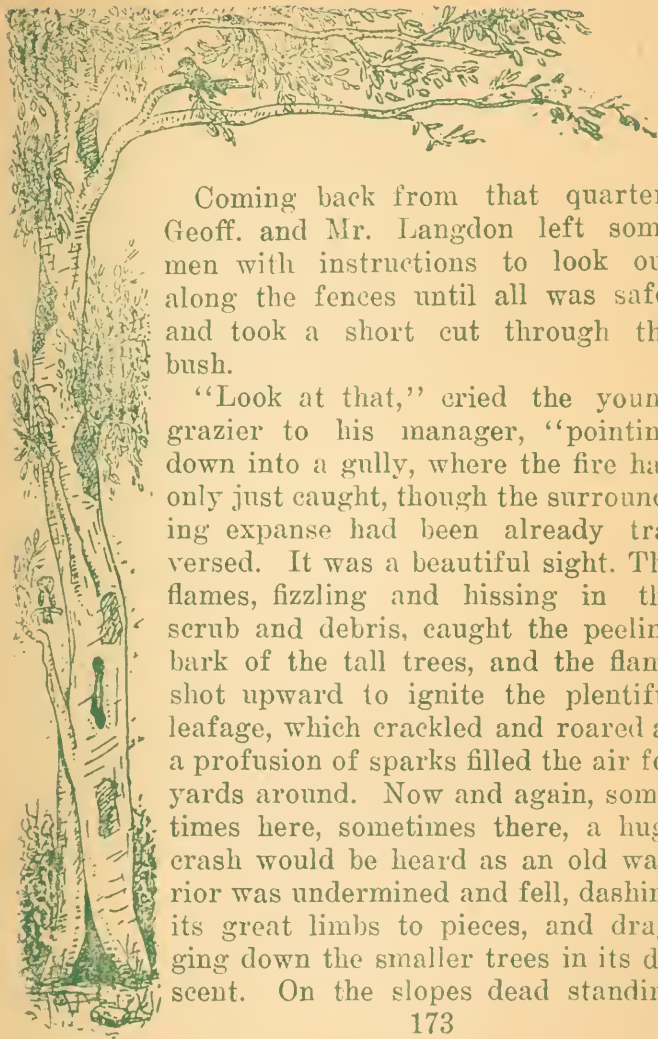
The water at command in the tanks was too precious to waste in the summer, and unfortunately the dam was surrounded by the raging fire. Carts of sand were brought into service, their loads being tipped where they could be shovelled upon the running fire in the dead leaves, and thus protect as much as possible of the fencing.

The fire-fighters numbered about



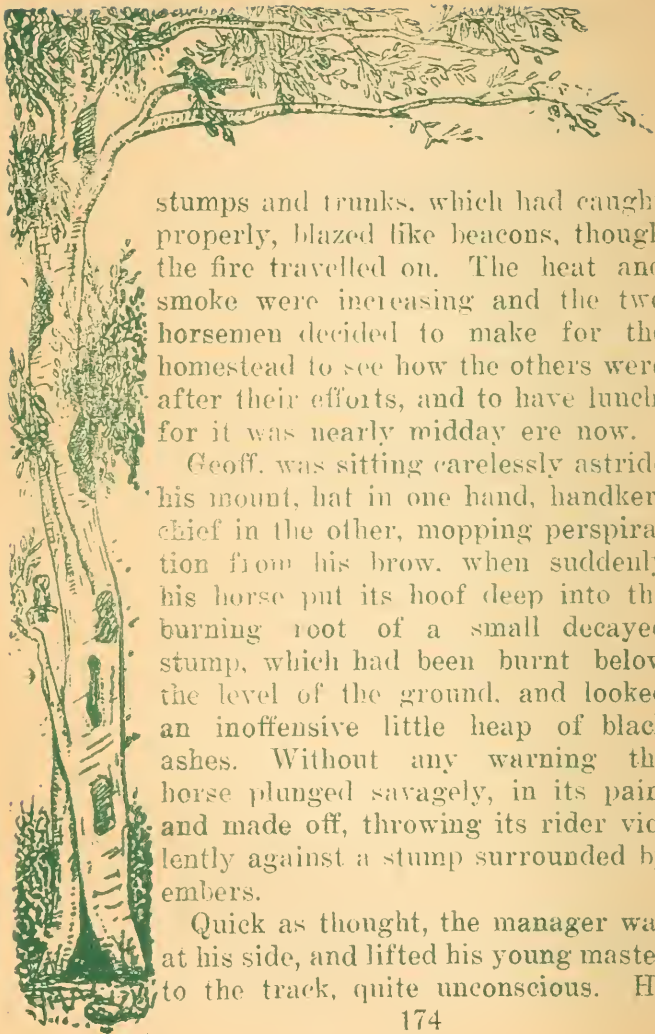
twenty, all told; but it was early in the preceding evening that the bush had caught from some logs infected by white ants, which Jack had foolishly risked burning. Now, however, the breeze was changing to a northerly, and, the fire having spent itself as it reached the less thickly timbered parts adjacent to the paddocks, was fairly checked from doing damage to the home and outhouses.

Mr. Saddington now thought of "Merrillee" boundary, and Geoff. and Mr. Langdon, seeing he was about done up, told him to leave that to them. So, taking all but about three or four of the "Lang Syne" men with his own party, Geoff. and the manager made off south, and then east, along the northern boundary of "Merrillee," but there was little danger in that quarter, for the fire was not so extensive as it had been fierce, from the grossly neglected state of the dry scrub near home.



Coming back from that quarter, Geoff. and Mr. Langdon left some men with instructions to look out along the fences until all was safe, and took a short cut through the bush.

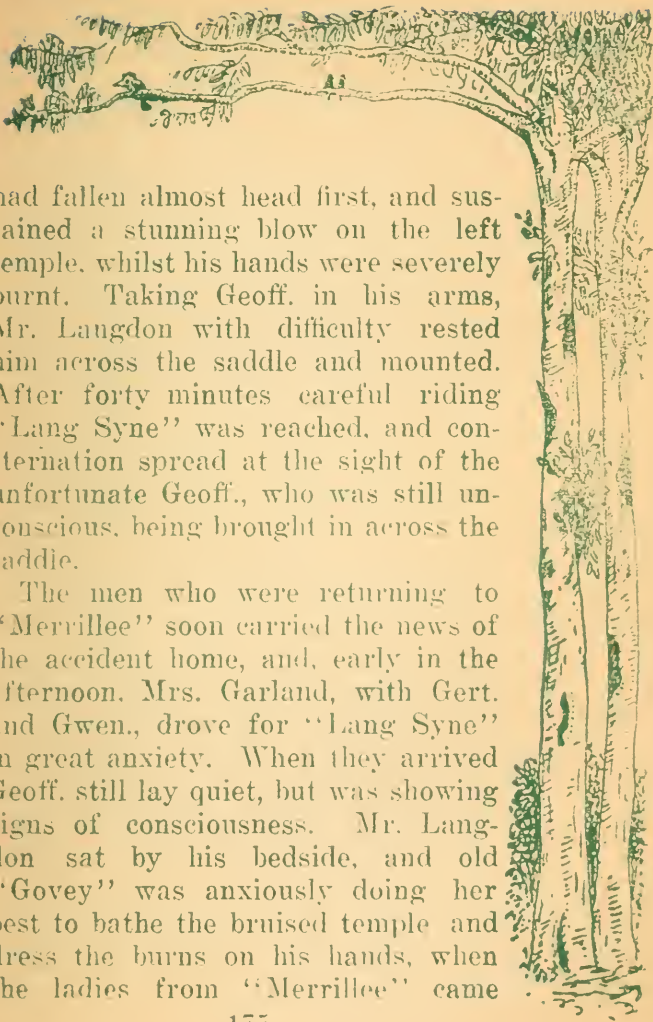
“Look at that,” cried the young grazier to his manager, “pointing down into a gully, where the fire had only just caught, though the surrounding expanse had been already traversed. It was a beautiful sight. The flames, fizzling and hissing in the scrub and debris, caught the peeling bark of the tall trees, and the flame shot upward to ignite the plentiful leafage, which crackled and roared as a profusion of sparks filled the air for yards around. Now and again, sometimes here, sometimes there, a huge crash would be heard as an old warrior was undermined and fell, dashing its great limbs to pieces, and dragging down the smaller trees in its descent. On the slopes dead standing



stumps and trunks, which had caught properly, blazed like beacons, though the fire travelled on. The heat and smoke were increasing and the two horsemen decided to make for the homestead to see how the others were after their efforts, and to have lunch, for it was nearly midday ere now.

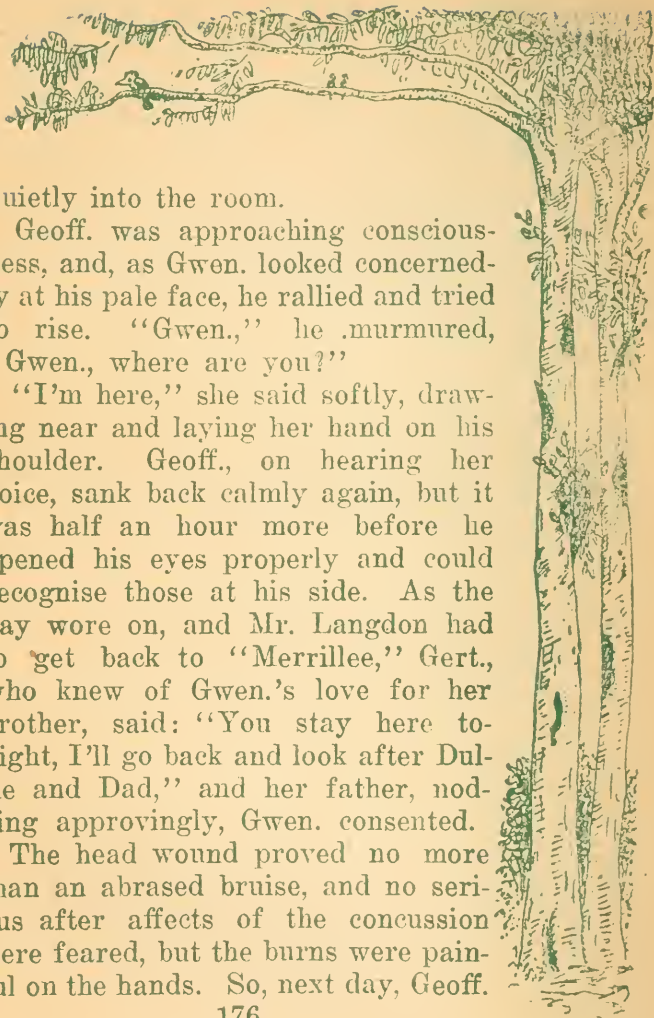
Geoff. was sitting carelessly astride his mount, hat in one hand, handkerchief in the other, mopping perspiration from his brow. when suddenly his horse put its hoof deep into the burning root of a small decayed stump, which had been burnt below the level of the ground, and looked an inoffensive little heap of black ashes. Without any warning the horse plunged savagely, in its pain, and made off, throwing its rider violently against a stump surrounded by embers.

Quick as thought, the manager was at his side, and lifted his young master to the track, quite unconscious. He



had fallen almost head first, and sustained a stunning blow on the left temple, whilst his hands were severely burnt. Taking Geoff. in his arms, Mr. Langdon with difficulty rested him across the saddle and mounted. After forty minutes careful riding "Lang Syne" was reached, and consternation spread at the sight of the unfortunate Geoff., who was still unconscious, being brought in across the saddle.

The men who were returning to "Merrillee" soon carried the news of the accident home, and, early in the afternoon, Mrs. Garland, with Gert. and Gwen., drove for "Lang Syne" in great anxiety. When they arrived Geoff. still lay quiet, but was showing signs of consciousness. Mr. Langdon sat by his bedside, and old "Govey" was anxiously doing her best to bathe the bruised temple and dress the burns on his hands, when the ladies from "Merrillee" came

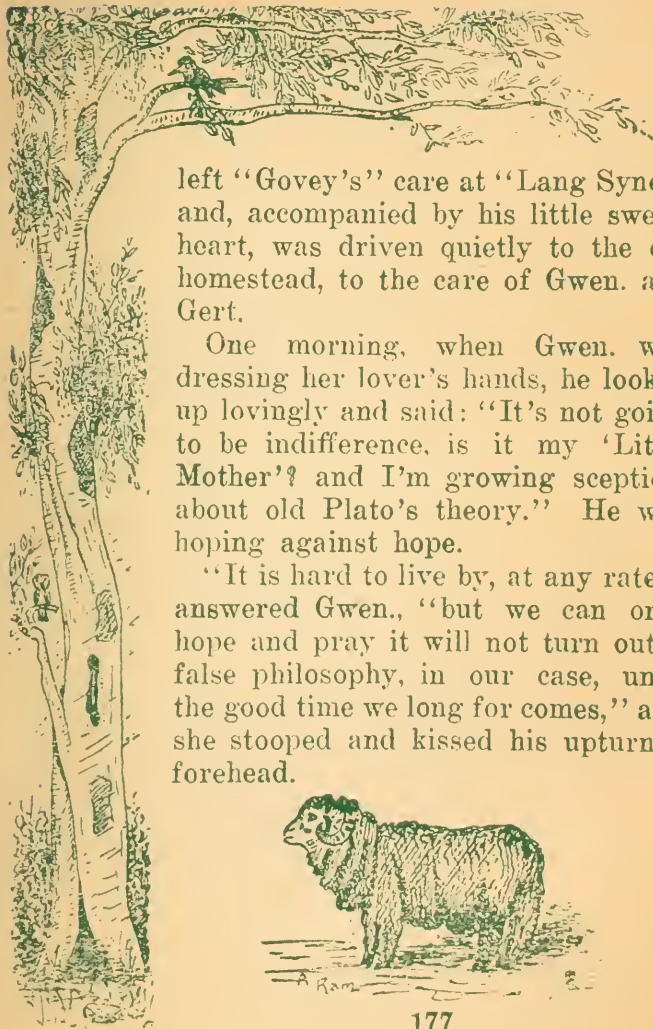


quietly into the room.

Geoff. was approaching consciousness, and, as Gwen. looked concernedly at his pale face, he rallied and tried to rise. "Gwen.," he murmured, "Gwen., where are you?"

"I'm here," she said softly, drawing near and laying her hand on his shoulder. Geoff., on hearing her voice, sank back calmly again, but it was half an hour more before he opened his eyes properly and could recognise those at his side. As the day wore on, and Mr. Langdon had to get back to "Merrillee," Gert., who knew of Gwen.'s love for her brother, said: "You stay here to-night, I'll go back and look after Dulcie and Dad," and her father, nodding approvingly, Gwen. consented.

The head wound proved no more than an abraded bruise, and no serious after effects of the concussion were feared, but the burns were painful on the hands. So, next day, Geoff.



left "Govey's" care at "Lang Syne," and, accompanied by his little sweetheart, was driven quietly to the old homestead, to the care of Gwen. and Gert.

One morning, when Gwen. was dressing her lover's hands, he looked up lovingly and said: "It's not going to be indifference, is it my 'Little Mother'? and I'm growing sceptical about old Plato's theory." He was hoping against hope.

"It is hard to live by, at any rate," answered Gwen., "but we can only hope and pray it will not turn out a false philosophy, in our case, until the good time we long for comes," and she stooped and kissed his upturned forehead.





CHAPTER XIX.

A Telling Sacrifice.

The time was passing slowly for the two Platonic friends, despite the fact that Gwen. and Dulcie were to be seen frequently with Geoff. in his rides, in the garden at "Sabine," or on the "rounds" of the "Little Mother."

It was Easter, and the early rains had set in, a very wet winter being predicted. The days were shortening with the approach of the cold months, and April was well on its way. Several times the "Creek" had risen to within a few feet of the bridge, but each time a lull in the elements allowed it to assume its normal level. But now the rain set in in earnest,

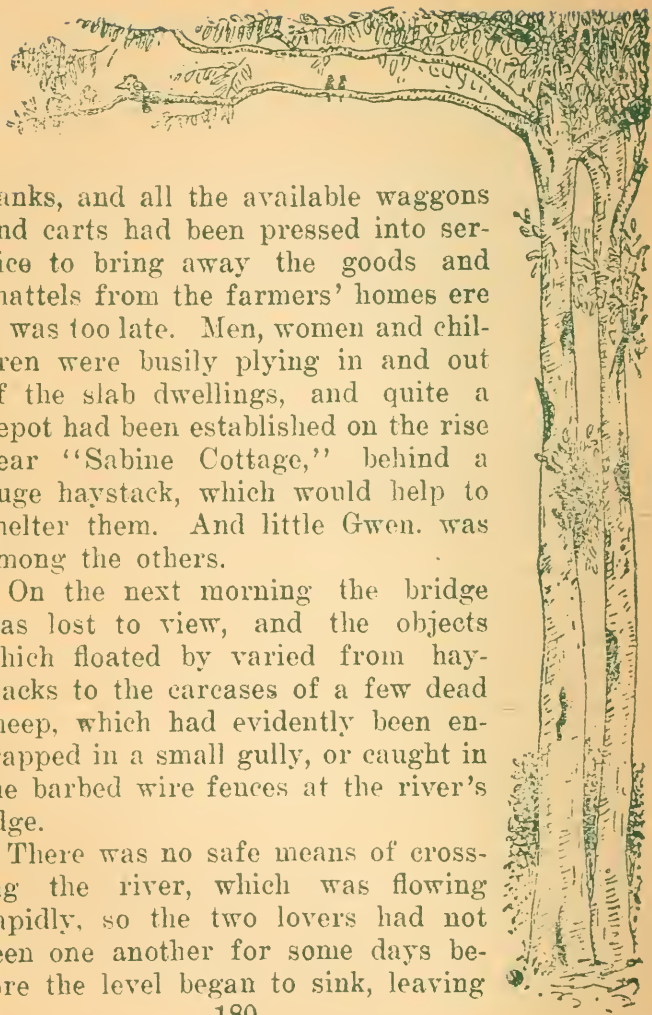


and Gwen. missed her rides with Geoff.

It was a busy time for master and manager alike. The boundaries had to be carefully ridden, and the flocks driven to the higher lands, for a flood was gravely apprehended. The "Creek" was now within a foot of the bridge, and debris was collecting against it, whilst the strength of the "fresh" in the stream, and the great tree trunks that were washed down, threatened to damage, if not carry it away.

But little loss could be sustained by the station itself, provided the flocks were safe, for the homestead and the cultivations surrounding it were on an elevated plain, compared to the lowlying flats on which the sharefarmers were stationed, and in and out of which the "Creek" wound its serpentine course.

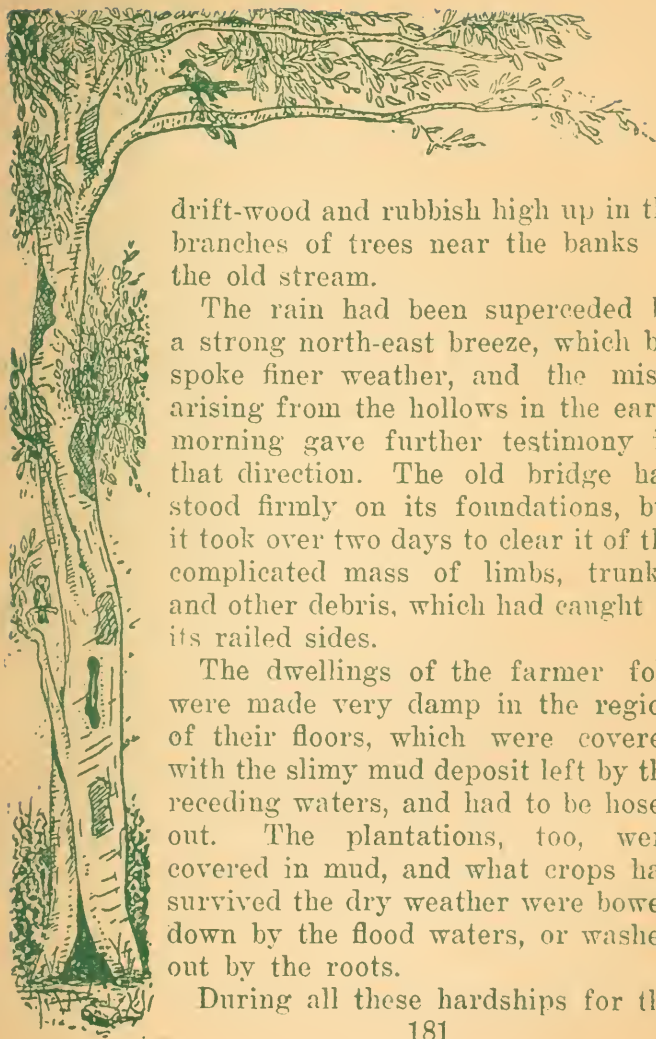
The river was already threatening to inundate those plantations near its



banks, and all the available waggons and carts had been pressed into service to bring away the goods and chattels from the farmers' homes ere it was too late. Men, women and children were busily plying in and out of the slab dwellings, and quite a depot had been established on the rise near "Sabine Cottage," behind a huge haystack, which would help to shelter them. And little Gwen. was among the others.

On the next morning the bridge was lost to view, and the objects which floated by varied from haystacks to the carcasses of a few dead sheep, which had evidently been entrapped in a small gully, or caught in the barbed wire fences at the river's edge.

There was no safe means of crossing the river, which was flowing rapidly, so the two lovers had not seen one another for some days before the level began to sink, leaving

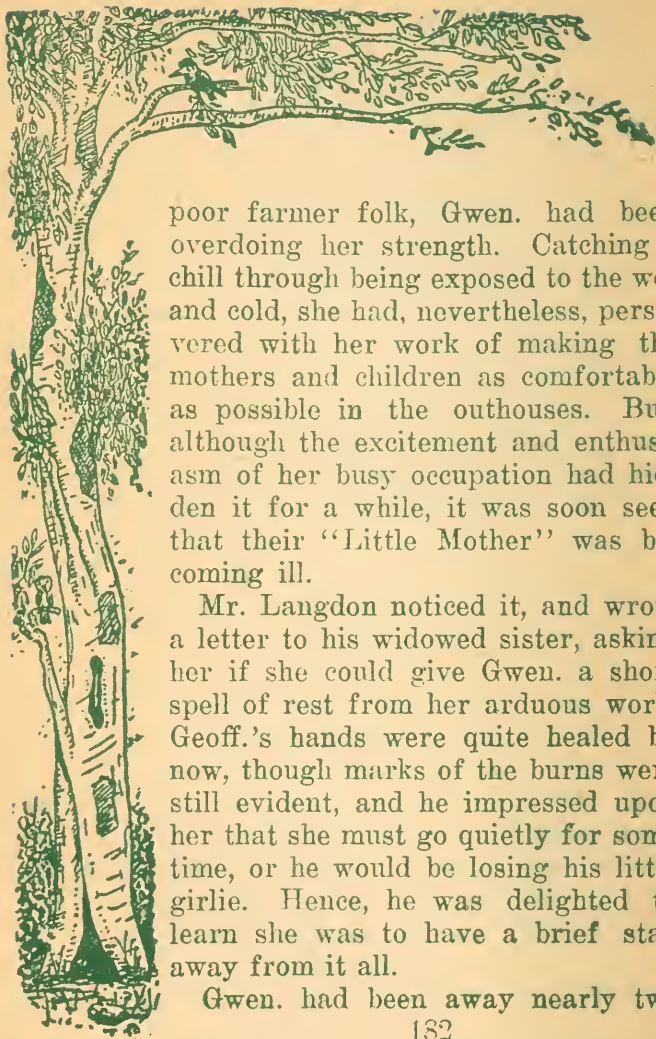


drift-wood and rubbish high up in the branches of trees near the banks of the old stream.

The rain had been superceded by a strong north-east breeze, which bespoke finer weather, and the mists arising from the hollows in the early morning gave further testimony in that direction. The old bridge had stood firmly on its foundations, but it took over two days to clear it of the complicated mass of limbs, trunks, and other debris, which had caught in its railed sides.

The dwellings of the farmer folk were made very damp in the region of their floors, which were covered with the slimy mud deposit left by the receding waters, and had to be hosed out. The plantations, too, were covered in mud, and what crops had survived the dry weather were bowed down by the flood waters, or washed out by the roots.

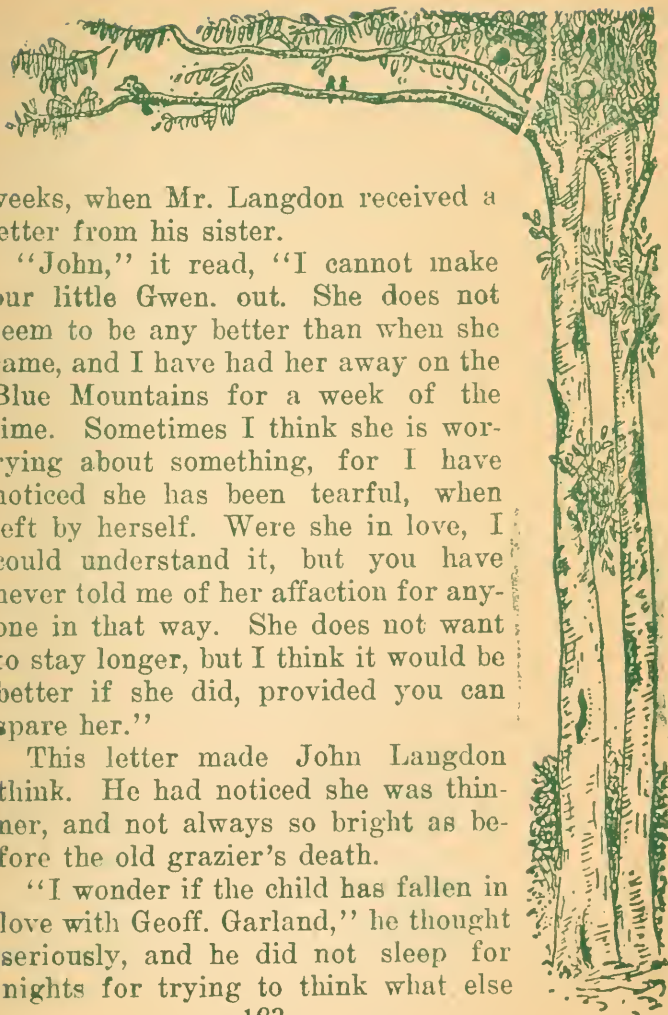
During all these hardships for the



poor farmer folk, Gwen. had been overdoing her strength. Catching a chill through being exposed to the wet and cold, she had, nevertheless, persevered with her work of making the mothers and children as comfortable as possible in the outhouses. But, although the excitement and enthusiasm of her busy occupation had hidden it for a while, it was soon seen that their "Little Mother" was becoming ill.

Mr. Langdon noticed it, and wrote a letter to his widowed sister, asking her if she could give Gwen. a short spell of rest from her arduous work. Geoff.'s hands were quite healed by now, though marks of the burns were still evident, and he impressed upon her that she must go quietly for some time, or he would be losing his little girlie. Hence, he was delighted to learn she was to have a brief stay away from it all.

Gwen. had been away nearly two



weeks, when Mr. Langdon received a letter from his sister.

"John," it read, "I cannot make our little Gwen. out. She does not seem to be any better than when she came, and I have had her away on the Blue Mountains for a week of the time. Sometimes I think she is worrying about something, for I have noticed she has been tearful, when left by herself. Were she in love, I could understand it, but you have never told me of her affection for anyone in that way. She does not want to stay longer, but I think it would be better if she did, provided you can spare her."

This letter made John Langdon think. He had noticed she was thinner, and not always so bright as before the old grazier's death.

"I wonder if the child has fallen in love with Geoff. Garland," he thought seriously, and he did not sleep for nights for trying to think what else

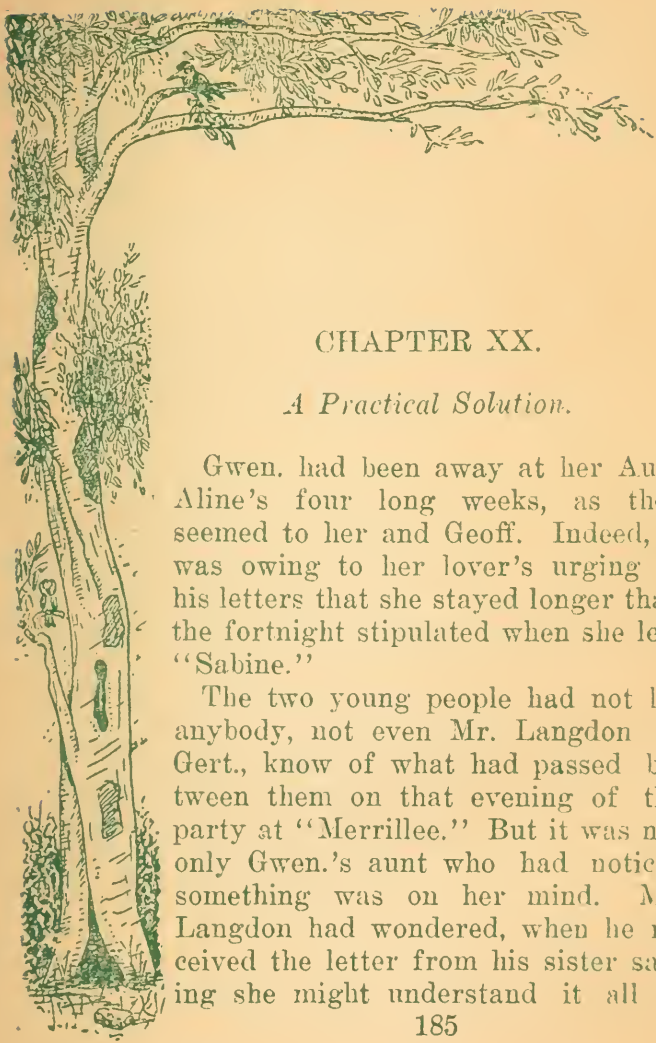


could be the subject of her unrest.

The "Little Mother" herself was realising dearly that what Geoff. had said about the Platonic philosophy was true. Only it was not indifference, but more intense love, that was making her ill in her determination to keep her word to her mother without losing Geoff.'s love, or her's for him.

It was too hard an experience for her sympathetic and sensitive nature, too great a sacrifice, and it was telling its tale.



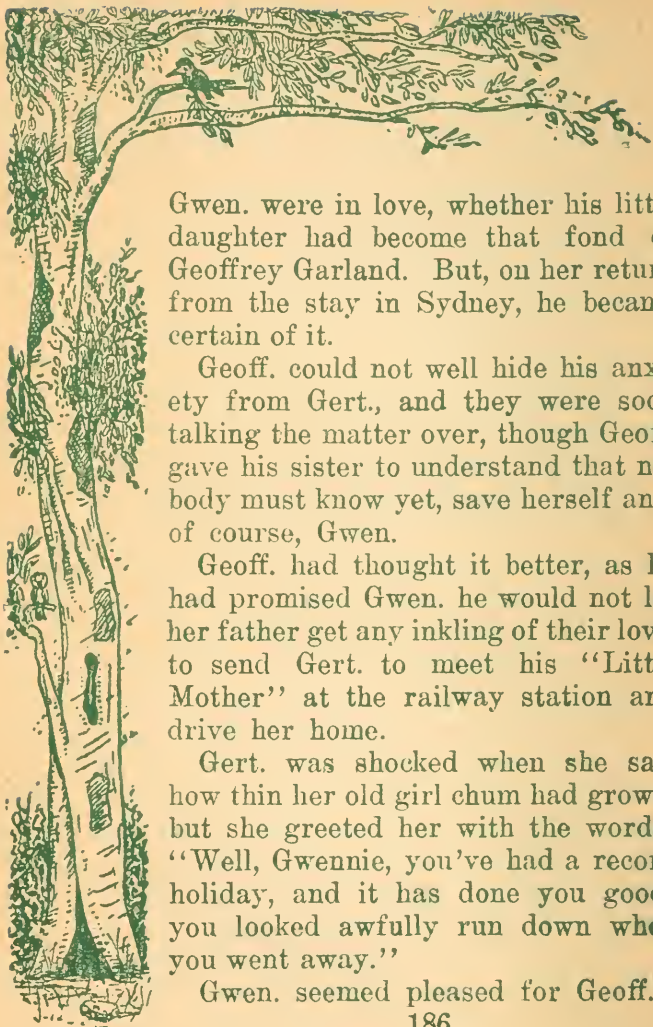


CHAPTER XX.

A Practical Solution.

Gwen. had been away at her Aunt Aline's four long weeks, as they seemed to her and Geoff. Indeed, it was owing to her lover's urging in his letters that she stayed longer than the fortnight stipulated when she left "Sabine."

The two young people had not let anybody, not even Mr. Langdon or Gert., know of what had passed between them on that evening of the party at "Merrillee." But it was not only Gwen.'s aunt who had noticed something was on her mind. Mr. Langdon had wondered, when he received the letter from his sister saying she might understand it all if



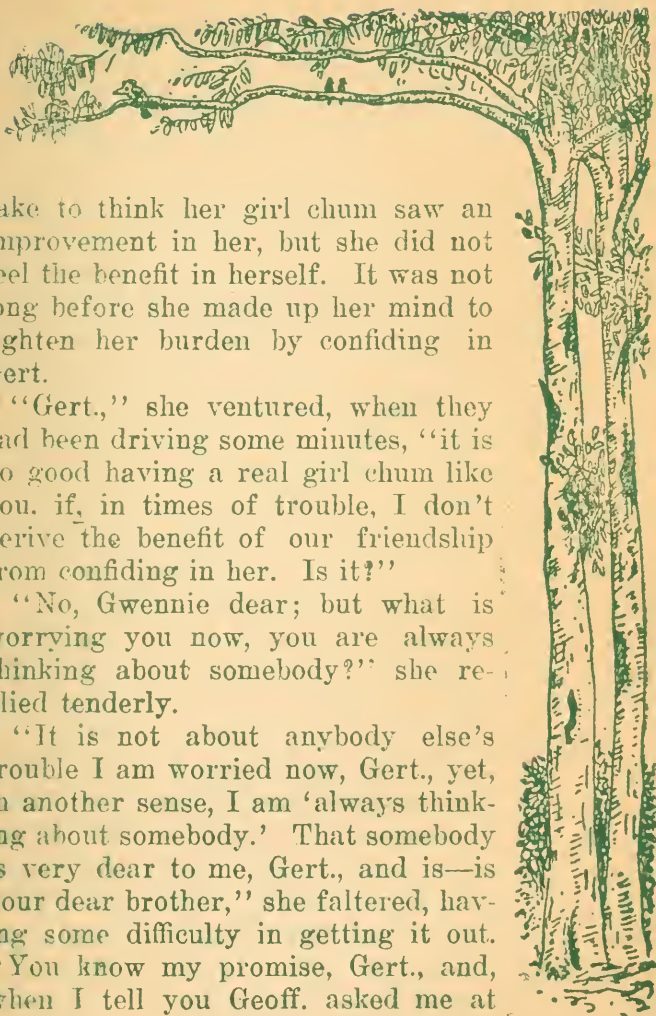
Gwen. were in love, whether his little daughter had become that fond of Geoffrey Garland. But, on her return from the stay in Sydney, he became certain of it.

Geoff. could not well hide his anxiety from Gert., and they were soon talking the matter over, though Geoff. gave his sister to understand that nobody must know yet, save herself and, of course, Gwen.

Geoff. had thought it better, as he had promised Gwen. he would not let her father get any inkling of their love, to send Gert. to meet his "Little Mother" at the railway station and drive her home.

Gert. was shocked when she saw how thin her old girl chum had grown, but she greeted her with the words: "Well, Gwennie, you've had a record holiday, and it has done you good; you looked awfully run down when you went away."

Gwen. seemed pleased for Geoff.'s

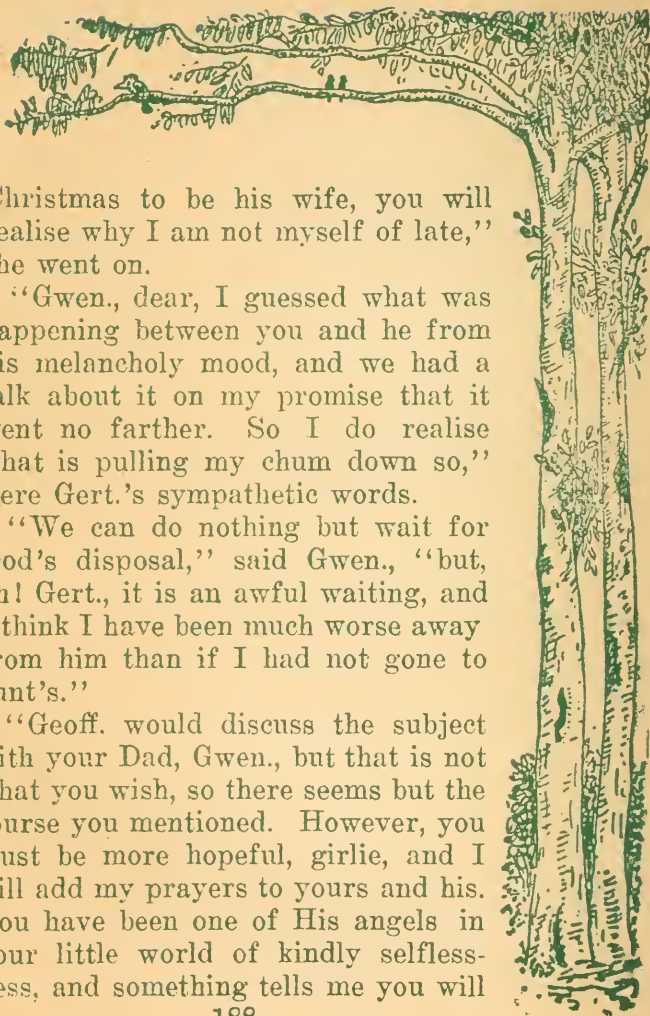


sake to think her girl chum saw an improvement in her, but she did not feel the benefit in herself. It was not long before she made up her mind to lighten her burden by confiding in Gert.

"Gert.," she ventured, when they had been driving some minutes, "it is no good having a real girl chum like you. if, in times of trouble, I don't derive the benefit of our friendship from confiding in her. Is it?"

"No, Gwennie dear; but what is worrying you now, you are always thinking about somebody?" she replied tenderly.

"It is not about anybody else's trouble I am worried now, Gert., yet, in another sense, I am 'always thinking about somebody.' That somebody is very dear to me, Gert., and is—is your dear brother," she faltered, having some difficulty in getting it out. "You know my promise, Gert., and, when I tell you Geoff. asked me at

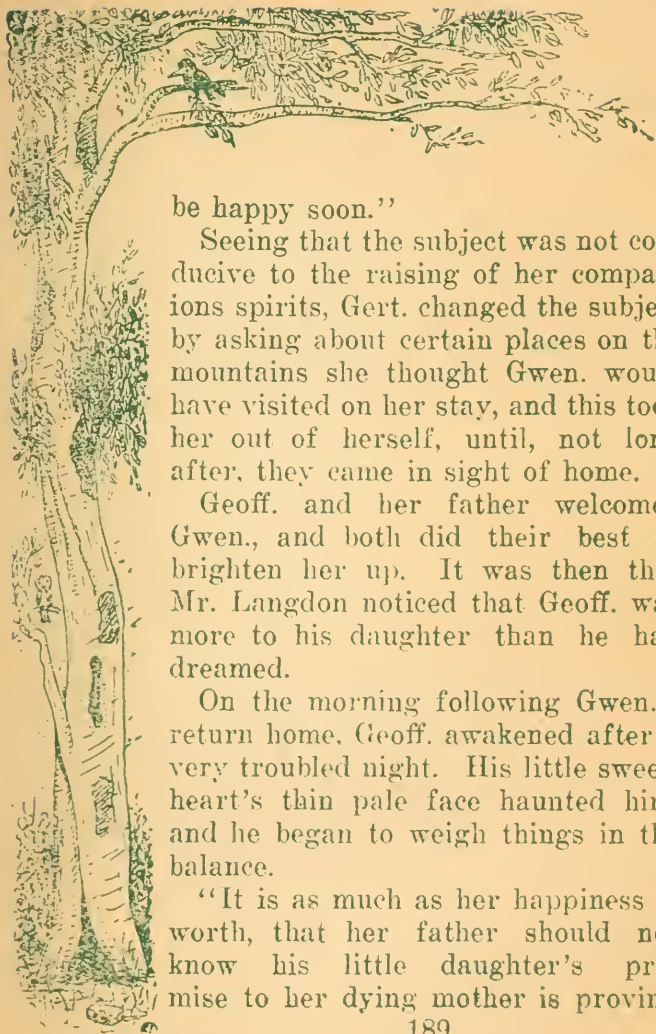


Christmas to be his wife, you will realise why I am not myself of late," she went on.

"Gwen., dear, I guessed what was happening between you and he from his melancholy mood, and we had a talk about it on my promise that it went no farther. So I do realise what is pulling my chum down so," were Gert.'s sympathetic words.

"We can do nothing but wait for God's disposal," said Gwen., "but, oh! Gert., it is an awful waiting, and I think I have been much worse away from him than if I had not gone to aunt's."

"Geoff. would discuss the subject with your Dad, Gwen., but that is not what you wish, so there seems but the course you mentioned. However, you must be more hopeful, girlie, and I will add my prayers to yours and his. You have been one of His angels in your little world of kindly selflessness, and something tells me you will



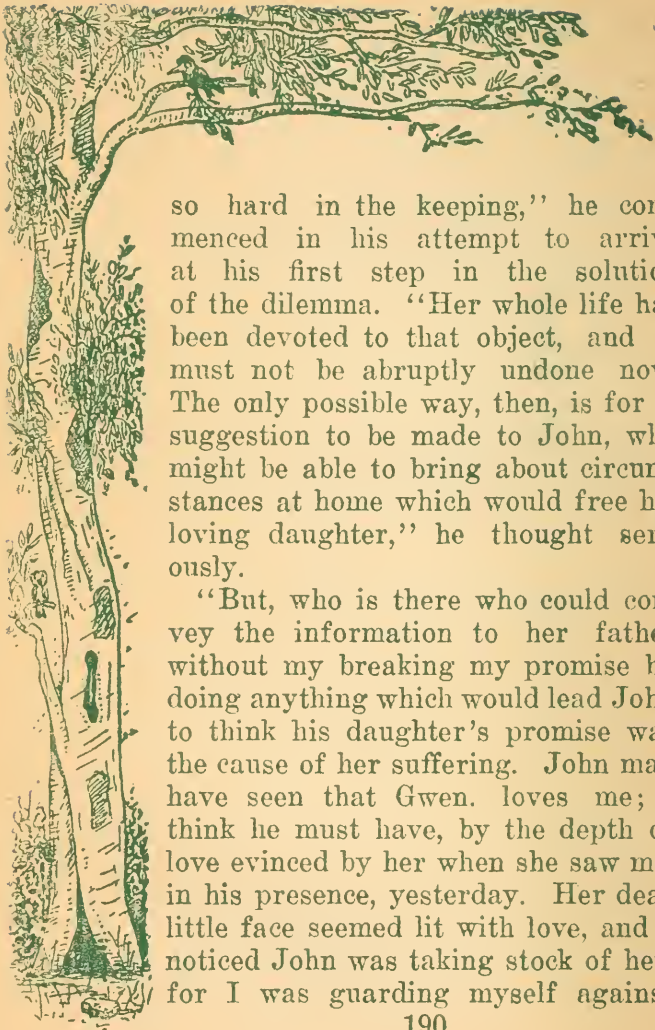
be happy soon."

Seeing that the subject was not conducive to the raising of her companions spirits, Gert. changed the subject by asking about certain places on the mountains she thought Gwen. would have visited on her stay, and this took her out of herself, until, not long after, they came in sight of home.

Geoff. and her father welcomed Gwen., and both did their best to brighten her up. It was then that Mr. Langdon noticed that Geoff. was more to his daughter than he had dreamed.

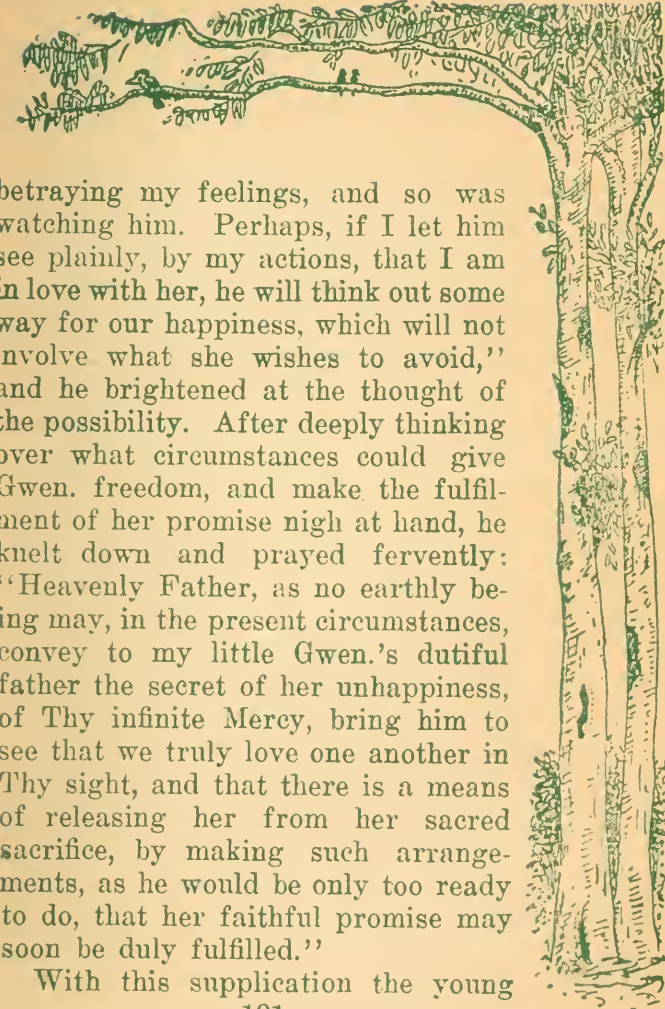
On the morning following Gwen.'s return home, Geoff. awakened after a very troubled night. His little sweetheart's thin pale face haunted him, and he began to weigh things in the balance.

"It is as much as her happiness is worth, that her father should not know his little daughter's promise to her dying mother is proving



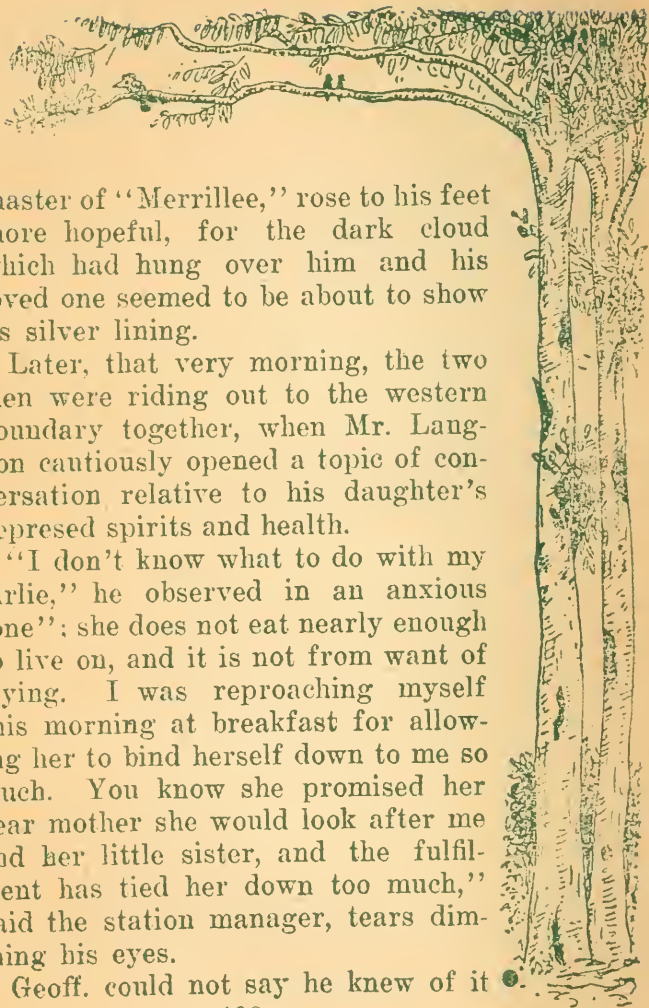
so hard in the keeping," he commenced in his attempt to arrive at his first step in the solution of the dilemma. "Her whole life has been devoted to that object, and it must not be abruptly undone now. The only possible way, then, is for a suggestion to be made to John, who might be able to bring about circumstances at home which would free his loving daughter," he thought seriously.

"But, who is there who could convey the information to her father without my breaking my promise by doing anything which would lead John to think his daughter's promise was the cause of her suffering. John may have seen that Gwen. loves me; I think he must have, by the depth of love evinced by her when she saw me, in his presence, yesterday. Her dear little face seemed lit with love, and I noticed John was taking stock of her, for I was guarding myself against



betraying my feelings, and so was watching him. Perhaps, if I let him see plainly, by my actions, that I am in love with her, he will think out some way for our happiness, which will not involve what she wishes to avoid," and he brightened at the thought of the possibility. After deeply thinking over what circumstances could give Gwen. freedom, and make the fulfilment of her promise nigh at hand, he knelt down and prayed fervently: "Heavenly Father, as no earthly being may, in the present circumstances, convey to my little Gwen.'s dutiful father the secret of her unhappiness, of Thy infinite Mercy, bring him to see that we truly love one another in Thy sight, and that there is a means of releasing her from her sacred sacrifice, by making such arrangements, as he would be only too ready to do, that her faithful promise may soon be duly fulfilled."

With this supplication the young

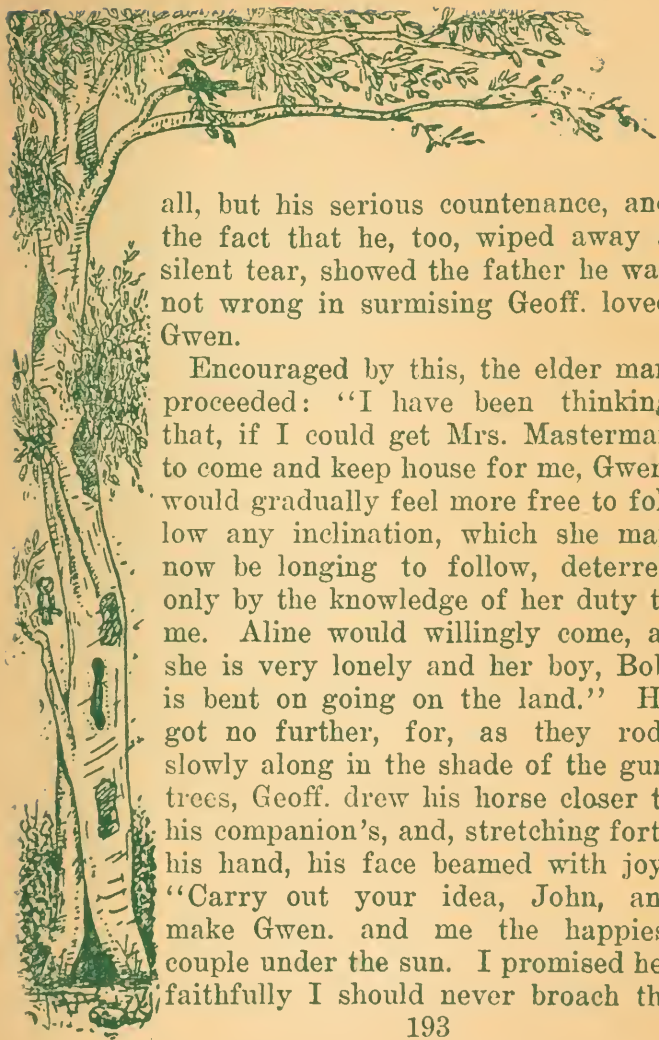


master of "Merrillee," rose to his feet more hopeful, for the dark cloud which had hung over him and his loved one seemed to be about to show its silver lining.

Later, that very morning, the two men were riding out to the western boundary together, when Mr. Langdon cautiously opened a topic of conversation relative to his daughter's depressed spirits and health.

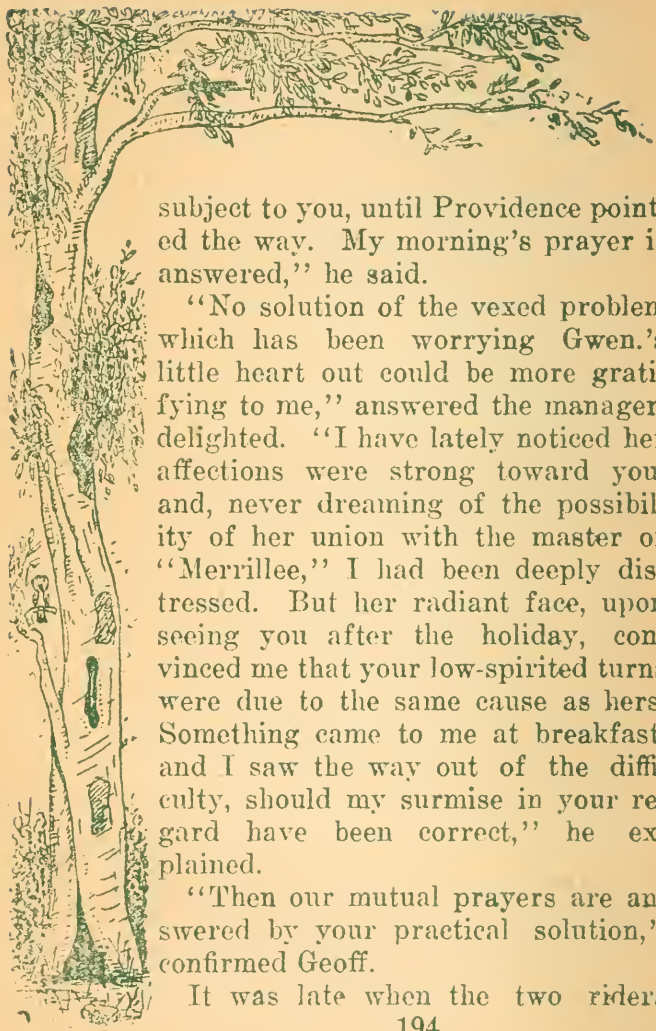
"I don't know what to do with my girlie," he observed in an anxious tone"; she does not eat nearly enough to live on, and it is not from want of trying. I was reproaching myself this morning at breakfast for allowing her to bind herself down to me so much. You know she promised her dear mother she would look after me and her little sister, and the fulfilment has tied her down too much," said the station manager, tears dimming his eyes.

Geoff. could not say he knew of it



all, but his serious countenance, and the fact that he, too, wiped away a silent tear, showed the father he was not wrong in surmising Geoff. loved Gwen.

Encouraged by this, the elder man proceeded: "I have been thinking that, if I could get Mrs. Masterman to come and keep house for me, Gwen. would gradually feel more free to follow any inclination, which she may now be longing to follow, deterred only by the knowledge of her duty to me. Aline would willingly come, as she is very lonely and her boy, Bob, is bent on going on the land." He got no further, for, as they rode slowly along in the shade of the gum trees, Geoff. drew his horse closer to his companion's, and, stretching forth his hand, his face beamed with joy: "Carry out your idea, John, and make Gwen. and me the happiest couple under the sun. I promised her faithfully I should never broach the



subject to you, until Providence pointed the way. My morning's prayer is answered," he said.

"No solution of the vexed problem which has been worrying Gwen's little heart out could be more gratifying to me," answered the manager, delighted. "I have lately noticed her affections were strong toward you, and, never dreaming of the possibility of her union with the master of "Merrillee," I had been deeply distressed. But her radiant face, upon seeing you after the holiday, convinced me that your low-spirited turns were due to the same cause as hers. Something came to me at breakfast, and I saw the way out of the difficulty, should my surmise in your regard have been correct," he explained.

"Then our mutual prayers are answered by your practical solution," confirmed Geoff.

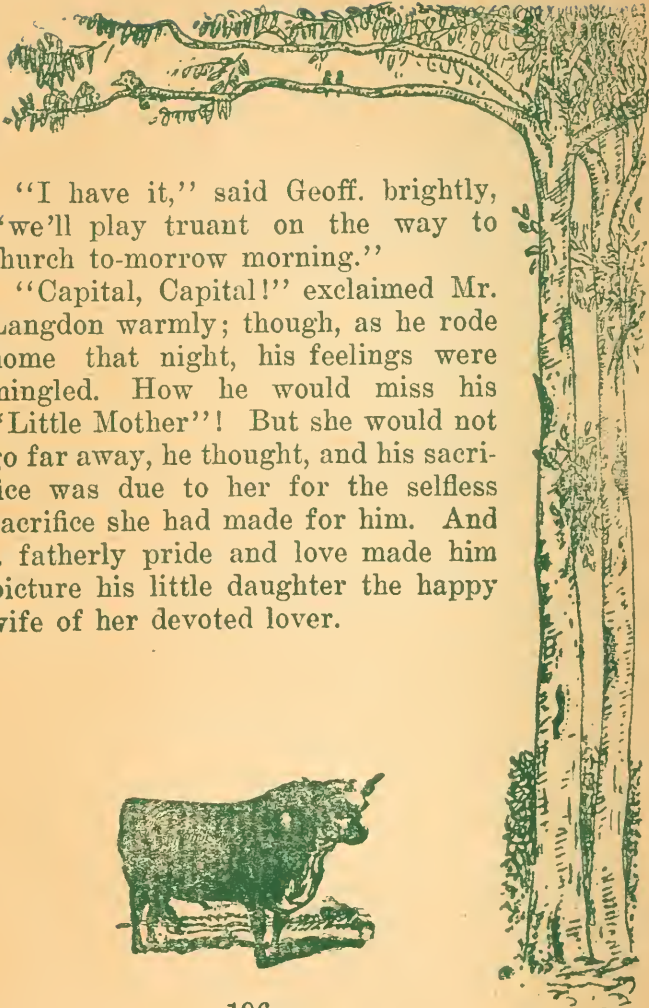
It was late when the two riders



reached "Merrillee" from their boundary riding. During the last few hours Geoff.'s delight was so great that he kept referring to the subject, telling many little episodes of love that had culminated in his determination to win Gwen.'s love.

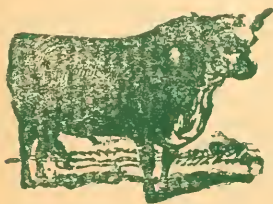
"I should never have acquiesced in our little Gwen.'s helping me so chummily to forget father's death had I not, as soon as I was aware of it, made up my mind to let my heart lead me. But I little guessed the obstacle which lay in our way, and oh! how glad will I be to see her loving little face, surrounded by her pretty nut-brown wavelets of hair, presenting once more its ruddy comeliness as the "Little Mother" of "Merrillee."

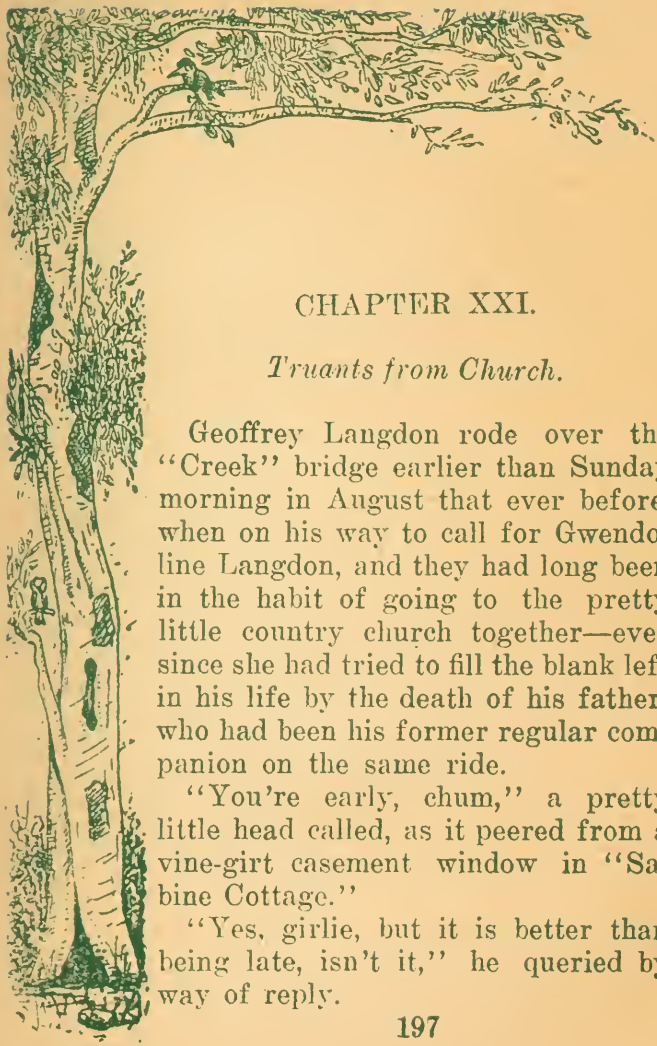
"I should not come over this evening to bring her the good tidings," said the father; "she will be tired, and, I think, you would both be happier, at that time, quite by yourselves."



“I have it,” said Geoff. brightly,
“we’ll play truant on the way to
church to-morrow morning.”

“Capital, Capital!” exclaimed Mr.
Langdon warmly; though, as he rode
home that night, his feelings were
mingled. How he would miss his
“Little Mother”! But she would not
go far away, he thought, and his sacri-
fice was due to her for the selfless
sacrifice she had made for him. And
a fatherly pride and love made him
picture his little daughter the happy
wife of her devoted lover.





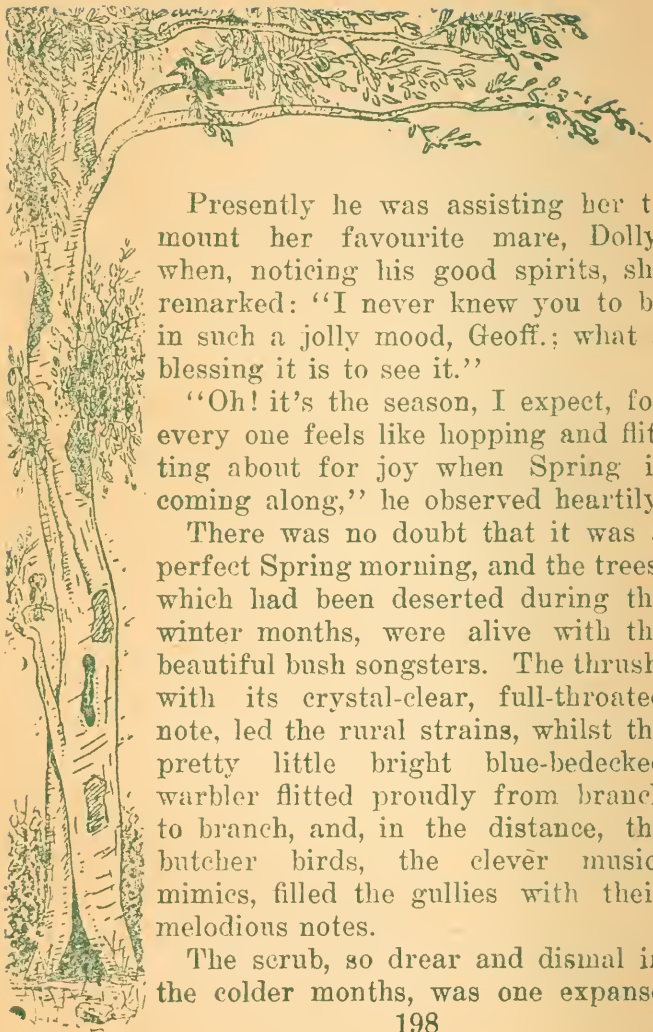
CHAPTER XXI.

Truants from Church.

Geoffrey Langdon rode over the "Creek" bridge earlier than Sunday morning in August that ever before, when on his way to call for Gwendoline Langdon, and they had long been in the habit of going to the pretty little country church together—ever since she had tried to fill the blank left in his life by the death of his father, who had been his former regular companion on the same ride.

"You're early, chum," a pretty little head called, as it peered from a vine-girt casement window in "Sabine Cottage."

"Yes, girlie, but it is better than being late, isn't it," he queried by way of reply.



Presently he was assisting her to mount her favourite mare, Dolly, when, noticing his good spirits, she remarked: "I never knew you to be in such a jolly mood, Geoff.; what a blessing it is to see it."

"Oh! it's the season, I expect, for every one feels like hopping and flitting about for joy when Spring is coming along," he observed heartily.

There was no doubt that it was a perfect Spring morning, and the trees, which had been deserted during the winter months, were alive with the beautiful bush songsters. The thrush, with its crystal-clear, full-throated note, led the rural strains, whilst the pretty little bright blue-bedecked warbler flitted proudly from branch to branch, and, in the distance, the butcher birds, the clever music-mimics, filled the gullies with their melodious notes.

The scrub, so drear and dismal in the colder months, was one expanse



of nature's wild flower garden. Here a bright yellow patch, there a ball of **pink**, elsewhere a mass of snowy white—all suffusing the atmosphere with their peculiar floral breath. The neat "native rose," the bright "boronia," the nobby wattle, Australia's national bloom, all were there lending their brightness to the budding spring.

"Gwen.," said Geoff., as they rode along a narrow track, which constituted a short cut through the bushland to the church, "say we play truant this splendid Spring morning? It's too lovely to leave this beauty spot for the cold aisles of the chilly church."

"I do not feel averse to worshipping in Nature's garden, Geoff., but what should I say when father, as is his wont, asked me about the sermon?" she asked her lover.

"I shall answer for your truancy," he said, adding, with a twinkle in his eyes, "if your Dad *does* ask you about



the sermon."

In a little while, having turned off the old track towards the lower reaches of the 'Creek,' the two riders dismounted to gather some wild flowers. Having collected a bright bunch, in the gathering of which Geoff. had become a little overheated, Gwen. suggested they should rest under the canopy of a huge stratum of rock, which defended the happy pair from the rays of the sun, now gradually approaching the vertical.

"Gwen. dear," Geoff. ventured, as they removed their hats and sat in the cool air of the cave, "you remarked upon my jovial temperament to-day. What would you think could make me regain my once light heart?"

Gwen. started, and looked Geoff. earnestly in the face. "Geoff. dear, you know something which makes you think our good time is at hand; but be careful, lest you set your heart too much on it, and be again disap-



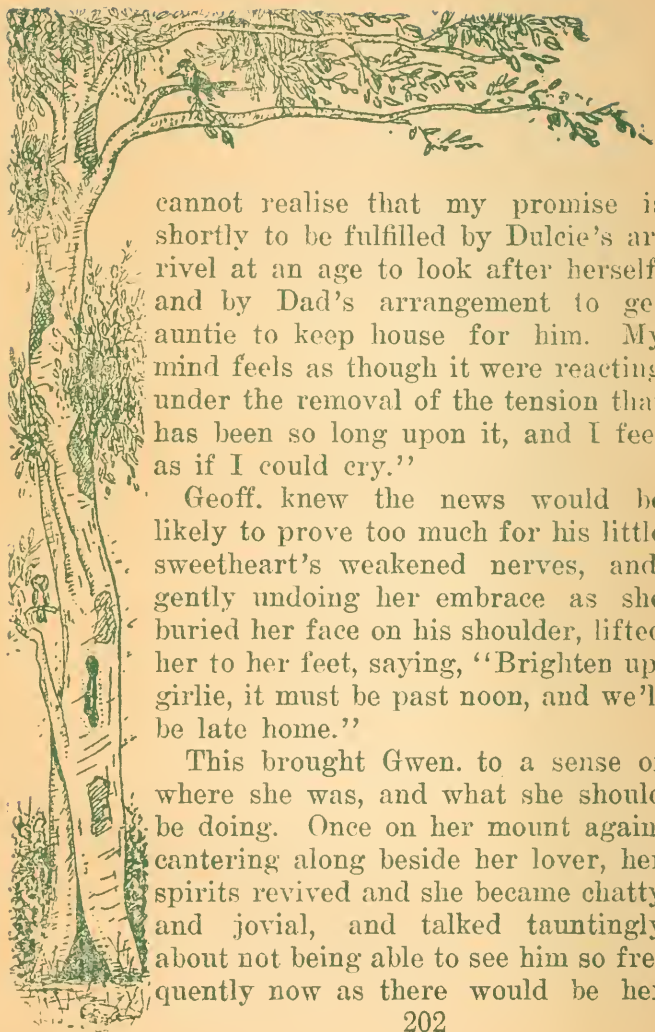
pointed," she said, fearing a fruitless re-opening of the subject.

"My little girlie, I should not have suggested playing truant to-day had I not known that some day soon we shall be making up the missing of this attendance at service by a happy attendance at a special service," he answered.

"Tell me," she begged, taking his hand fondly in her's; "tell me, Geoff., what makes you think so?"

Drawing her close by his side, Geoff. went through all the thoughts and prayers which had filled his mind since Christmas, culminating in the story of his chat with Mr. Langdon when riding the western boundary on the previous evening.

Gwen. listened quietly until the good news was out. "Dear old Dad," she exclaimed, "it is characteristic of his love that he should fathom the cause of my falling off in spirits, though I tried hard to be better. I



cannot realise that my promise is shortly to be fulfilled by Dulcie's arrival at an age to look after herself, and by Dad's arrangement to get auntie to keep house for him. My mind feels as though it were reacting under the removal of the tension that has been so long upon it, and I feel as if I could cry."

Geoff. knew the news would be likely to prove too much for his little sweetheart's weakened nerves, and, gently undoing her embrace as she buried her face on his shoulder, lifted her to her feet, saying, "Brighten up, girly, it must be past noon, and we'll be late home."

This brought Gwen. to a sense of where she was, and what she should be doing. Once on her mount again, cantering along beside her lover, her spirits revived and she became chatty and jovial, and talked tauntingly about not being able to see him so frequently now as there would be her

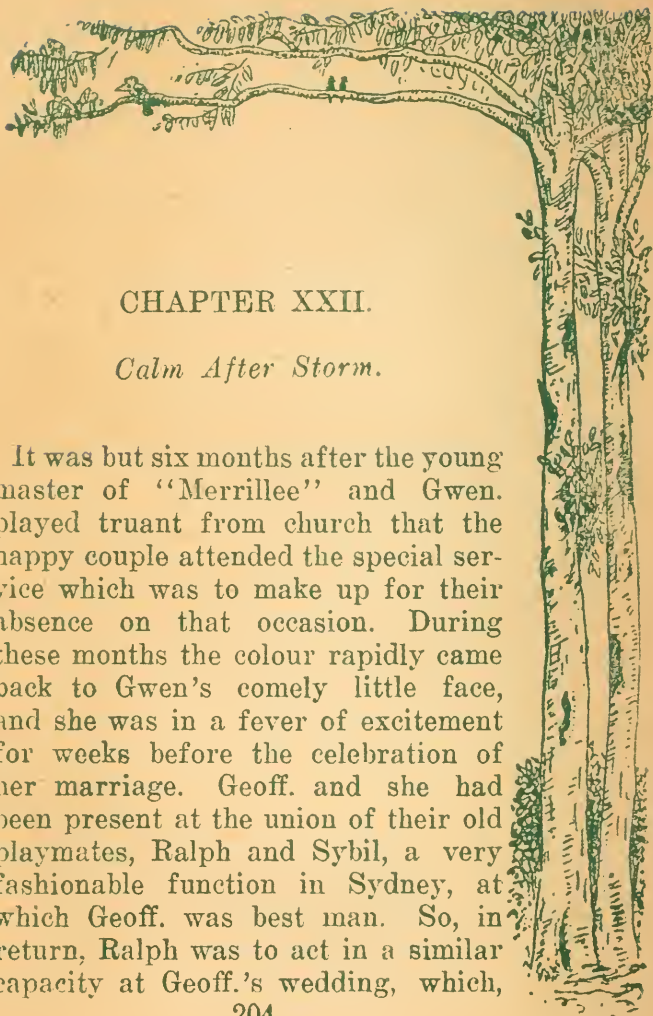


trousseau to get ready.

After a brisk ride, they arrived at "Sabine," and, whilst Geoff. was handing over the horses to the care of the stable boy, Gwen. tried to go to her room unperceived, but her father caught her eye and called from the sitting room: "You look flushed after your ride, Gwennie, or was the sermon productive of shame in you?" and he chuckled audibly.

"You're a wicked old Dad to laugh at me like this; but you're not going to get rid of me as easily as that, for I am to live near my dear old Dad, and will still help to take care of him," and she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him fondly.

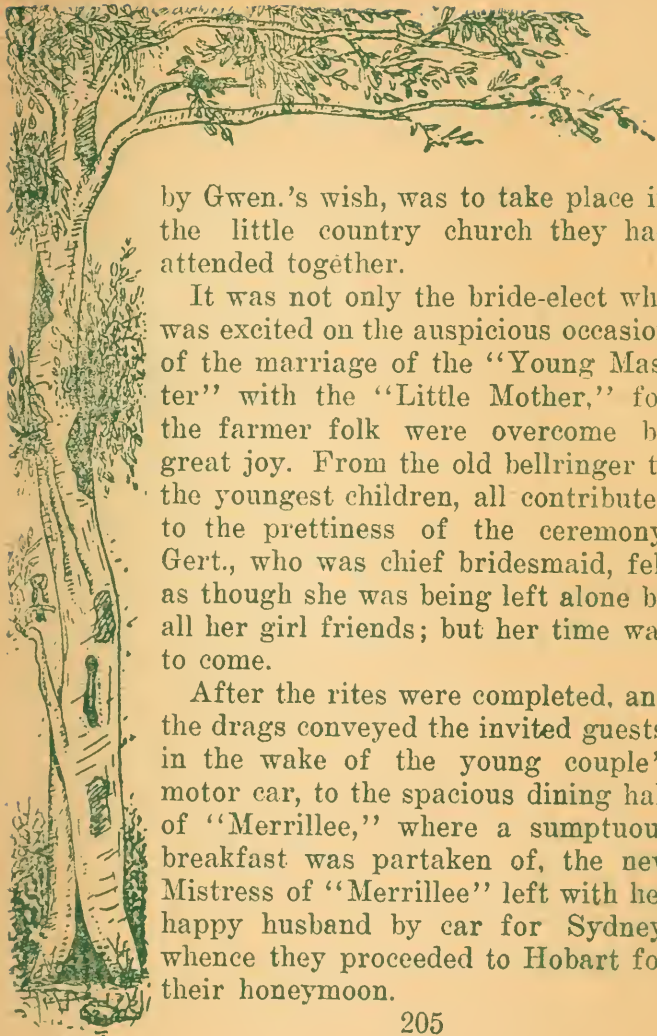




CHAPTER XXII.

Calm After Storm.

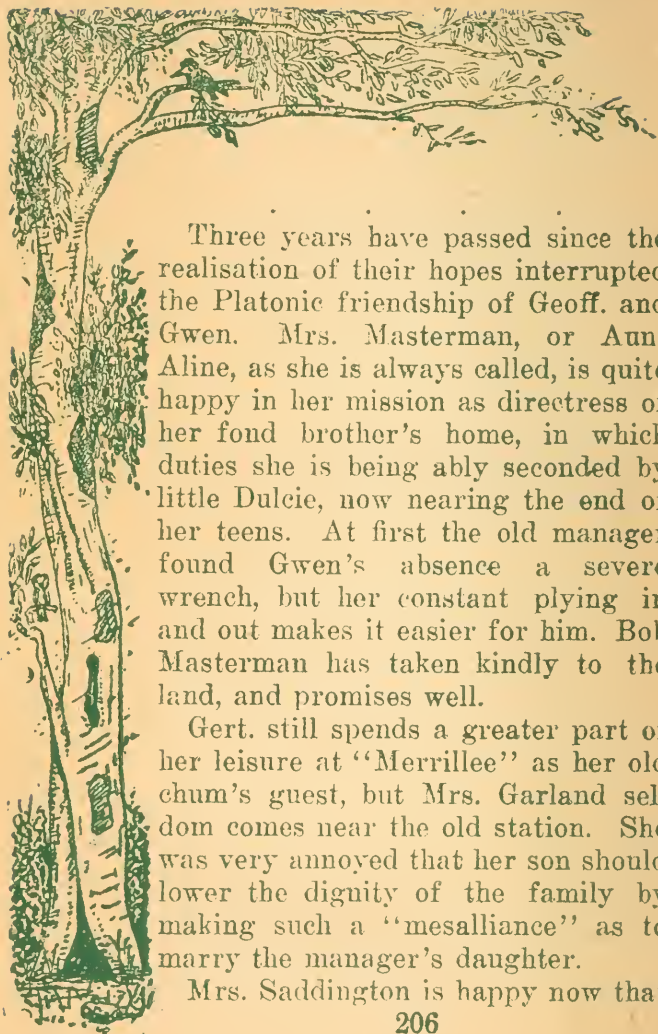
It was but six months after the young master of "Merrillee" and Gwen. played truant from church that the happy couple attended the special service which was to make up for their absence on that occasion. During these months the colour rapidly came back to Gwen's comely little face, and she was in a fever of excitement for weeks before the celebration of her marriage. Geoff. and she had been present at the union of their old playmates, Ralph and Sybil, a very fashionable function in Sydney, at which Geoff. was best man. So, in return, Ralph was to act in a similar capacity at Geoff.'s wedding, which,



by Gwen.'s wish, was to take place in the little country church they had attended together.

It was not only the bride-elect who was excited on the auspicious occasion of the marriage of the "Young Master" with the "Little Mother," for the farmer folk were overcome by great joy. From the old bellringer to the youngest children, all contributed to the prettiness of the ceremony. Gert., who was chief bridesmaid, felt as though she was being left alone by all her girl friends; but her time was to come.

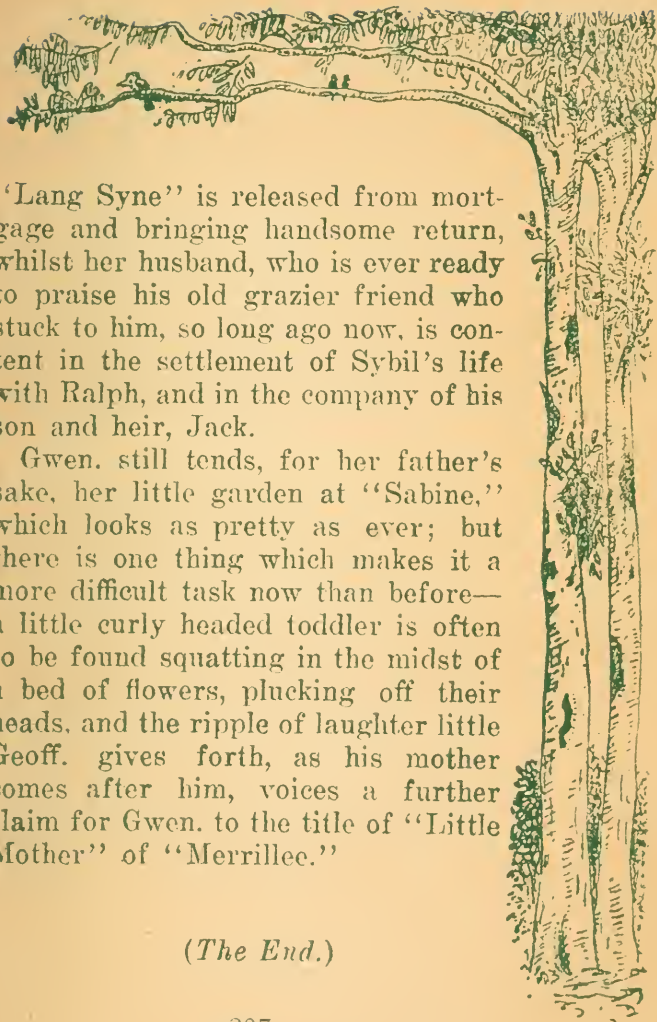
After the rites were completed, and the drags conveyed the invited guests, in the wake of the young couple's motor car, to the spacious dining hall of "Merrillee," where a sumptuous breakfast was partaken of, the new Mistress of "Merrillee" left with her happy husband by car for Sydney, whence they proceeded to Hobart for their honeymoon.



Three years have passed since the realisation of their hopes interrupted the Platonic friendship of Geoff. and Gwen. Mrs. Masterman, or Aunt Aline, as she is always called, is quite happy in her mission as directress of her fond brother's home, in which duties she is being ably seconded by little Dulcie, now nearing the end of her teens. At first the old manager found Gwen's absence a severe wrench, but her constant plying in and out makes it easier for him. Bob Masterman has taken kindly to the land, and promises well.

Gert. still spends a greater part of her leisure at "Merrillee" as her old chum's guest, but Mrs. Garland seldom comes near the old station. She was very annoyed that her son should lower the dignity of the family by making such a "mesalliance" as to marry the manager's daughter.

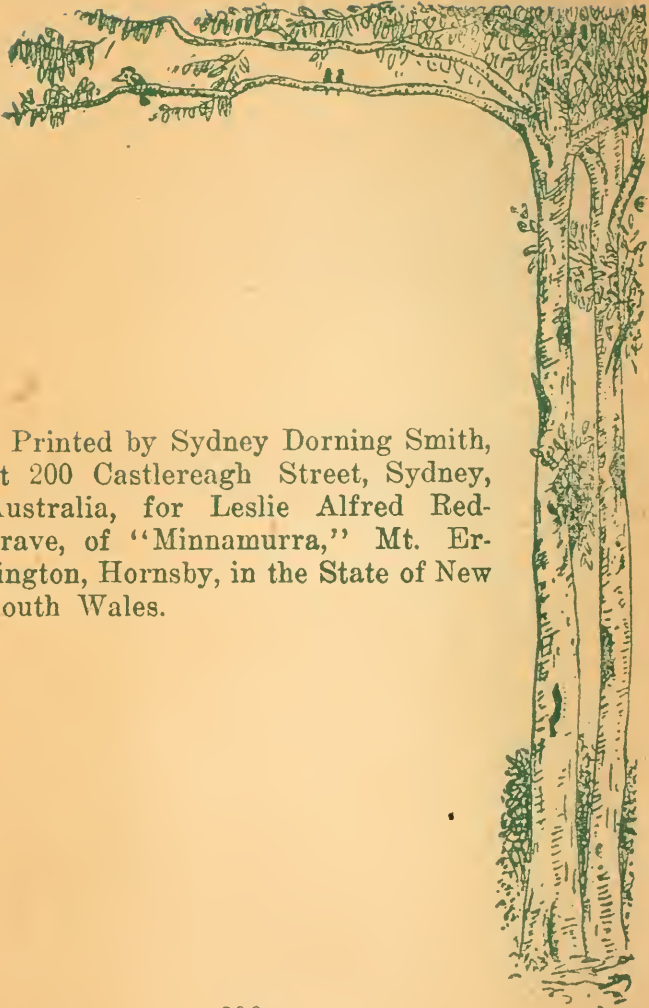
Mrs. Saddington is happy now that



“Lang Syne” is released from mortgage and bringing handsome return, whilst her husband, who is ever ready to praise his old grazier friend who stuck to him, so long ago now, is content in the settlement of Sybil’s life with Ralph, and in the company of his son and heir, Jack.

Gwen. still tends, for her father’s sake, her little garden at “Sabine,” which looks as pretty as ever; but there is one thing which makes it a more difficult task now than before—a little curly headed toddler is often to be found squatting in the midst of a bed of flowers, plucking off their heads, and the ripple of laughter little Geoff. gives forth, as his mother comes after him, voices a further claim for Gwen. to the title of “Little Mother” of “Merrillee.”

(The End.)



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